

The role of the family in juvenile delinquency

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage where environmental and relational factors, particularly within the family, significantly shape behavior. This article explores the pivotal role of family dynamics in the development of violent and delinquent behaviors among adolescents. Drawing on multidisciplinary research, it examines how factors such as parental attachment, supervision, family conflict, and socioeconomic challenges contribute to behavioral outcomes. Dysfunctional parenting practices, including harsh discipline or neglect, are highlighted as key drivers of delinquency, while supportive family environments are identified as protective factors. The study underscores the necessity of early interventions targeting family systems to mitigate the risk of youth violence and delinquency. Emphasizing evidence-based approaches, it advocates for integrated family therapies and community support programs as essential tools for prevention and rehabilitation.

Keywords

Adolescent delinquency, family dynamics, youth violence, parenting practices, family interventions, juvenile behavior

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Introduction

The family plays a crucial role in the psychosocial, emotional, and cognitive development of the child, providing the first environment for expression, growth, socialization, and the assimilation of social norms and moral values. One of the most important factors for a child's development is the emotional stability and support of the family environment. According to Darling and Steinberg (1993), the emotional stability and support that the family provides is essential for the child's mental well-being [1].

When children feel safe and accepted, they are more likely to develop high self-esteem and confidence in their abilities, which contributes to their broader emotional and social development [2]. Additionally, the family—and more specifically, parents—play a role in fostering children's social skills and communication. Parents serve as role models for their children in how they communicate and handle issues. The way a child communicates and interacts with others is a result of their communication with their parents and the way they are taught to manage situations.

Thus, the family acts as the first framework for socialization, where children learn fundamental social skills. Studies highlight the importance of positive communication and interaction within the family, noting that these are critical issues that improve children's social skills, helping them to form healthy relationships outside the family environment as well [3].

The family is also the primary transmitter of values and moral principles. According to Schaffer and Kipp (2013), children are significantly influenced by the values conveyed within the family. Parental behaviors serve as examples for children, shaping their own moral compass and perceptions of right and wrong [4]. Parental involvement in a child's education has been associated with academic success. The closer parents are to their children and the more they engage with schoolwork, the better children perform academically. Fan and Chen (2001) found that parental involvement, such as helping with homework and showing interest in their progress, is linked to better academic performance. Family support also provides children with the necessary motivation for success and fosters a love of learning [5].

Developing skills such as resilience is one of the most important benefits of a supportive family. According to Werner and Smith (2001), children raised in stable and supportive families are more likely to overcome challenges successfully and develop emotional management skills. Supportive parents help children learn from failures and develop a positive outlook on life [6]. The family is also where children learn to take on responsibilities and make decisions. As Baumrind (1991) states, parents who allow their children to express opinions and make decisions contribute to the development of autonomy. This autonomy and responsibility lead to psychological maturity and the cultivation of independent, responsible individuals [7].

Finally, the family atmosphere significantly affects children's mental health. A supportive family environment is linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression in children, while children

from families with tension may experience increased stress levels. Parents who provide emotional support and stability play a key role in maintaining their children's mental well-being [8].

Socialization within the family

The family serves as the foundational unit for socialization, significantly influencing individuals' development and integration into society. This section explores the various roles and impacts of the family in the socialization process.

Foundation of Values and Norms: Families are instrumental in instilling core values and norms in children. Through daily interactions, parents and caregivers transmit cultural beliefs, ethical standards, and social expectations, which serve as the foundation for children's future behaviors and decision-making processes.

Emotional and Psychological Development: The family environment is crucial for emotional support and psychological well-being. Secure attachments formed in early childhood contribute to healthy emotional regulation and social skills, allowing children to navigate social relationships effectively [9].

Role Modeling: Parents and family members act as role models for children, who often imitate the behaviors and attitudes of adults in their lives. This modeling can affect various aspects of life, including communication styles, coping mechanisms, and social interactions [10].

Social Identity Formation: Families contribute to the formation of social identity by providing a sense of belonging and affiliation. Cultural, ethnic, and familial backgrounds shape how individuals perceive themselves and their roles within society [11].

Transmission of Cultural Heritage: Families are the primary means through which cultural traditions, language, and customs are passed down from generation to generation. This transmission is vital for maintaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of community [12].

Social Skills Development: The family environment provides the first context for social interactions, helping children develop essential social skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. Positive family interactions foster the development of these skills, which are crucial for success in wider social contexts [13].

The family is a fundamental factor in the socialization process, influencing an individual's values, emotional health, identity, and social skills. Understanding the family's role in socialization can inform interventions and policies aimed at supporting healthy family dynamics and fostering positive social outcomes for children and adolescents.

Parenting style

Parenting styles significantly influence child development and behavior. Research identifies four primary parenting styles, each characterized by different approaches to child-rearing. Here's an overview of these four styles along with relevant references.

Authoritative Parenting

Authoritative parents are warm and nurturing but also set clear rules and expectations. They encourage independence while maintaining a supportive environment. This style is associated with high levels of responsiveness and demandingness. Children raised by authoritative parents tend to be self-reliant, socially competent, and exhibit better emotional regulation. They are often more successful in academic settings and have higher self-esteem [14].

Authoritarian Parenting

Authoritarian parents are strict and demand obedience, often emphasizing discipline over warmth. They have high expectations and enforce rules without allowing for much flexibility. Communication is usually one-sided, with little room for children to express their opinions. The authoritarian style has high demandingness and low responsiveness and is characterized by firmly enforced rules and edicts decided by parents as well as strong control over children's autonomy [15, 16]. Children raised by authoritarian parents may be obedient and proficient but often struggle with self-esteem and social skills. They may also exhibit higher levels of anxiety and are more prone to depression [17].

Permissive Parenting

Permissive parenting, on the other hand, has low demands and high responsiveness. It is characterized by a lack of monitoring, control, and discipline, yet it is warm and nurturing [18, 19]. Permissive parents typically show acceptance and warmth toward their children's desires and actions, allowing them to manage their activities with minimal restrictions. This type of parenting arises when parents fail to set clear boundaries or expect developmentally appropriate behavior from their children. As a result, permissive parenting may have negative consequences on the children's psychosocial development, as children of permissive parents may develop traits such as narcissistic tendencies, social irresponsibility, and egocentric motivation [20].

Neglectful (or Uninvolved) Parenting

Neglectful parents are low in both responsiveness and demandingness. They are often detached from their children's lives and may be indifferent to their needs, leading to a lack of emotional support and guidance. Children raised in neglectful environments may experience feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. They often struggle academically and socially and may engage in delinquent behaviors due to a lack of supervision and support [21].

The four parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—have distinct characteristics and influence children's development in different ways. Understanding these styles can help parents adopt more effective strategies for raising their children and provide valuable insights for researchers and practitioners in the field of child development.

Understanding Juvenile Delinquency: Causes, Risk Factors, and Interventions

Juvenile delinquency constitutes antisocial and deviant behavior. It is an aberrant conduct that may involve acts contrary to the legal and moral framework of a society. Delinquency is often confused with criminality, which refers to the totality of crimes committed within a specific time and place in a social group. By using these terms interchangeably, we prejudge that a child exhibiting delinquent behavior will inevitably become a criminal. This perspective renders any effort for prevention and change seemingly ineffective and futile. Juvenile delinquency poses significant social and psychological challenges, influencing individuals, families, and communities. This issue reflects a complex interplay of environmental, familial, and personal factors that drive risky and criminal behaviors among youth. Understanding these elements is critical for addressing delinquent behavior and developing effective interventions. Delinquent behaviors among adolescents range from substance use and petty theft to more severe crimes like assault. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) [22], delinquency is often a result of overlapping risk factors, including family instability, peer influence, and socio-economic disadvantage [23]. Studies reveal that over 25% of arrested youth report adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse or neglect, which correlate strongly with delinquent behavior. Juvenile delinquency has increased by 70% between 2020 and 2023 in Greece, with cases involving minors handled by the Hellenic Police rising by 60% over the same period. This comes against a backdrop of juvenile gangs engaging in robberies, threatening violence to steal mobile phones, money, and even clothing from their victims. Police data reveals that in 2022, nearly two students per day became victims of attacks, thefts, or attempts. Beyond robberies, there has also been a dramatic rise in violent beatings and brutal clashes (Hellenic Police, 2024).

The characteristics of juvenile offenders

Children with delinquent behavior often experience intense emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and anger, accompanied by outbursts of rage. They frequently have low self-esteem and express feelings of worthlessness. In many cases, juveniles tend to withdraw, particularly from their families, show disinterest in participating in activities, and prefer spending a significant amount of time away from home.

Additionally, they often fail to comply with rules. Regarding school, they show apathy toward their studies and are frequently absent, which negatively impacts their academic performance. A notable characteristic of minors with delinquent behavior is their significant difficulty adapting to new situations and changes.

Furthermore, children involved in delinquent behaviors often exhibit some form of Conduct Disorder. These are a category of disorders that manifest in children and adolescents, affecting their relationships with family, peers, and teachers, as well as their school performance and overall behavior. However, delinquency should not be confused with conduct disorders, despite sharing common elements.

Risk factors for adolescent delinquency

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Researches highlights that adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, and exposure to household dysfunction, significantly increase the likelihood of delinquency. Early exposure to multiple ACEs correlates with poor self-control and early-onset delinquent behavior [24].

Family Dynamics: Parental involvement, supervision, and family attachment play a significant role. Dysfunctional family environments, including domestic violence, harsh discipline, and parental criminality, are strong predictors of delinquency. Supportive and structured family settings can serve as protective factors. Children from single-parent households, families experiencing high levels of conflict, or those with low socioeconomic status are at higher risk of developing delinquent behaviors. Studies suggest that economic stress and a lack of resources can strain family relationships, contributing to behavioral problems in children [25].

Parental Monitoring and Discipline: Ineffective or inconsistent parenting, such as poor supervision, inconsistent discipline, or overly harsh punishment, is strongly linked to delinquency. Children raised in environments with little parental control are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior [26].

Parenting Styles and Delinquency: Research shows that parental warmth and strictness are key factors influencing delinquency. Parenting styles that combine high warmth with consistent discipline (authoritative parenting) are protective against delinquency. In contrast, authoritarian (strict without warmth) and neglectful parenting (low warmth and discipline) are associated with higher rates of delinquency. Adolescents with neglectful or authoritarian parents often show lower self-esteem, poorer academic outcomes, and more antisocial behaviors [27].

Socioeconomic and Community Factors: Socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, inadequate access to education, and unsafe neighborhoods contribute to youth involvement in crime. Community-based programs emphasizing skill-building and mentorship have shown positive results in mitigating these risks [28]. Research from diverse cultural contexts suggests that the relationship between parenting style and delinquency can vary based on socio-economic factors and cultural norms. For example, in some cultures, strictness without warmth may be less effective at curbing delinquent behavior, challenging older beliefs that strictness alone fosters better outcomes [29].

Individual Traits and Peer Influence: Traits like impulsivity, low empathy, and involvement with delinquent peers amplify the risk of criminal behaviors. Early interventions aimed at developing social and emotional skills can significantly alter these trajectories [30].

Interventions for Adolescent Delinquency: A Comprehensive Approach

Delinquent behavior often emerges in response to a combination of biological, social, environmental, and psychological factors. To address this issue effectively, interventions must be

tailored to the unique needs of each adolescent, considering factors such as family dynamics, peer influence, socioeconomic status, and mental health. This article expands on evidence-based interventions aimed at preventing and treating delinquent behavior in adolescents, offering a comprehensive approach to tackling this growing concern.

Family-Based Interventions

The family environment plays a central role in shaping adolescent behavior. Dysfunctional family dynamics, including poor communication, neglect, parental substance abuse, and domestic violence, are significant predictors of delinquency. Research indicates that family-based interventions can be highly effective in preventing and treating delinquent behavior by improving family interactions, communication, and parenting practices.

Multisystemic Therapy (MST): MST is an intensive family- and community-based treatment designed to address the multiple causes of juvenile delinquency. The therapy works with the adolescent and their family to improve communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills. MST has been shown to reduce recidivism and improve family functioning by addressing the family, school, and community factors that influence delinquency [31]. MST has been implemented successfully across various settings, demonstrating its flexibility and effectiveness in reducing youth crime and improving family cohesion.

Functional Family Therapy (FFT): FFT is another family-based intervention that has shown promise in reducing juvenile delinquency. This model focuses on improving family dynamics through strengthening parent-child relationships and addressing family conflicts. FFT has been particularly effective in treating adolescents involved in substance abuse and criminal behavior, helping families develop healthy coping strategies [32]. The approach emphasizes strengthening the parent-child bond and encouraging positive behavioral reinforcement within the family setting.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a widely used and evidence-based treatment for delinquent adolescents. CBT focuses on changing negative thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to criminal actions. Adolescents who engage in delinquent behavior often exhibit impulsivity, aggression, and poor decision-making. CBT works by teaching adolescents to identify and challenge distorted thoughts, develop coping strategies, and make better decisions.

CBT for Juvenile Offenders: Studies have shown that CBT is effective in reducing aggression, impulsivity, and recidivism among adolescent offenders [33]. By addressing underlying cognitive distortions, such as justifying violent behavior or excusing theft, CBT helps adolescents understand the consequences of their actions and encourages pro-social behavior. The individualized nature of CBT allows therapists to tailor the intervention to the specific needs and issues of each adolescent, making it an essential tool in treating juvenile delinquency.

Group CBT Programs: In addition to individual therapy, group CBT interventions have also been implemented in juvenile justice settings. Group therapy allows adolescents to learn from one another, share experiences, and practice social skills in a supportive environment. Group CBT has been found to improve emotional regulation, reduce aggression, and strengthen interpersonal relationships, all of which contribute to decreased delinquent behavior [34].

Prevention Programs

Prevention programs focus on identifying at-risk youth early and providing interventions before delinquent behavior develops. These programs typically address underlying risk factors such as poverty, family dysfunction, and peer pressure, and aim to reduce the likelihood of future criminal behavior. Primary prevention programs target the general population of youth and include efforts to prevent smoking, drug use, and teen pregnancy. Secondary prevention programs target youth at elevated risk for a particular outcome, such as delinquency or violence, a group that might include those in disadvantaged neighborhoods, those struggling in school, or those exposed to violence at home [35].

School-Based Programs

Given that adolescents spend a large portion of their time in educational settings, school-based interventions play a crucial role in both preventing and addressing delinquent behavior. Effective school programs aim to create a positive learning environment, promote emotional and social skills, and provide early interventions for students at risk of delinquency.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): PBIS is a proactive approach to promoting positive behavior in schools by establishing clear expectations and rewarding desirable behavior. Research indicates that schools implementing PBIS see reductions in suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary actions, which in turn reduce the likelihood of further delinquency [36]. By focusing on reinforcing positive behaviors rather than punishing negative ones, PBIS creates an environment that fosters academic achievement and social-emotional development.

Restorative Justice: Restorative justice programs focus on repairing the harm caused by delinquent behavior, allowing offenders to take responsibility for their actions and make amends. In schools, restorative justice practices often involve dialogues between victims and offenders, facilitated by a trained mediator. This process helps students understand the impact of their actions on others and encourages accountability and empathy. Restorative justice has been shown to reduce suspensions, promote better relationships between students, and prevent future violence [37].

Community-Based Programs

In addition to family and school interventions, community-based programs are vital in providing adolescents with alternatives to delinquent behavior. These programs aim to engage adolescents in positive activities and provide support systems

outside of their immediate home and school environments.

Mentorship Programs: Programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters pair at-risk youth with adult mentors who provide guidance, support, and a positive role model. Studies show that mentoring can reduce delinquency by helping adolescents build self-esteem, improve academic performance, and avoid risky behaviors [38]. The long-term nature of these relationships provides adolescents with the stability and support they need to make positive life choices.

Recreational and Vocational Programs: Community-based recreational and vocational programs provide adolescents with constructive outlets for their time and energy. Sports leagues, arts programs, and job training initiatives not only keep youth engaged in positive activities but also build skills that enhance their future prospects. These programs are especially beneficial for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, offering a safe environment where they can develop discipline, teamwork, and self-respect [39].

Conclusion

The family plays a critical role in shaping the behaviors and emotional development of adolescents, with family dynamics often serving as a key determinant in the emergence of violent and delinquent behaviors. Research consistently highlights that dysfunctional family environments—characterized by inconsistent discipline, conflict, abuse, and neglect—are strongly associated with an increased risk of delinquency among youth [40, 41]. These environments contribute to the development of maladaptive coping mechanisms, poor social skills, and an increased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, including substance abuse and criminal activity. Conversely, supportive and cohesive family environments that promote healthy communication, emotional support, and appropriate discipline can serve as protective factors against delinquency. Family-based interventions, such as Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Functional Family Therapy (FFT), have demonstrated considerable success in mitigating the risk of juvenile delinquency by enhancing family functioning and addressing underlying issues such as substance abuse, family conflict, and emotional distress [42]. These interventions offer hope by targeting the root causes of delinquent behavior, demonstrating that the family unit can be both a source of risk and resilience. Given the profound impact that family dynamics have on adolescent behavior, it is essential for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals to prioritize family-focused approaches in the prevention and treatment of juvenile delinquency. By strengthening family relationships and providing support to at-risk families, society can reduce the likelihood of violence and delinquency, promoting healthier developmental outcomes for adolescents and fostering safer, more cohesive communities.

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