

Parenting Practices and Callous-Unemotional Traits in Children

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In recent years, a number of researchers examining criminal behaviour have begun to focus on the pathways that may lead an individual to offend. A new subdiscipline, which Andrews and Bonta (2003) refer to as developmental criminology, has emerged from this, and is concerned with the early prediction of offending behaviour. One of the developments to come out of this new area is research into psychopathic traits, or more specifically, callous-unemotional traits, in children.

Psychopathy and Callous-Unemotional Traits

Psychopathy has been described as a blend of interpersonal, behavioural, and affective traits that can be applied to a particular group of people who engage in antisocial behaviour. Characteristics of psychopathy include increased narcissism, superficial charm, impulsivity, callousness, and lack of empathy and guilt (Hare, 1996, 1999). Antisocial adults with psychopathic traits have been shown to offend more often and commit a greater variety of offences than their non-psychopathic counterparts (Hare & McPherson, 1984). They are also more resilient to rehabilitation (Hart, Kropp, & Hare, 1988) and commit more serious offences (Serin, 1991).

There is evidence to suggest that psychopathic traits are stable across the lifespan, although offending behaviour itself tends to decrease after age 40 (Hare, McPherson, & Forth, 1988). Because of this stability it is also reasonable to presume that psychopathic traits, like most traits, begin early in life. As the presence of psychopathy appears to predict future offending (Hart, Kropp, & Hare, 1988) as well as being stable throughout life, it may provide a useful tool for identifying children who are at high risk for offending behaviour and criminal careers (Marsee, Silverthorn, & Frick, 2005).

Recent research into extending the concept of psychopathy to children has highlighted two dimensions that appear to be closely related to dimensions found in adult populations (Frick, O'Brien, Wootton, & McBurnett, 1994). The Impulsivity/Conduct Problems (I/CP) dimension involves antisocial behaviours and poor impulse control. These factors are often witnessed in those children who may have diagnoses of Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Oppositional Defiant Disorder – diagnoses that may occur in conjunction with offending behaviour. The Callous/Unemotional (CU) dimension describes lack of empathy and concern, lack of guilt, and superficial charm. This latter dimension taps into the more psychologically-based dimension (i.e., Factor 1) of psychopathy that is often evident in adult populations (Hare, 1996). To date, a great wealth of research into the origins of offending have focused on the actual criminal acts, both in terms of frequency and severity, undertaken by children as markers for future criminality. While it is reasonable to expect that the risk of future criminality is well predicted by a history of criminality, the psychological aspects of offending by children can also provide valuable predictive information, particularly the influence of psychopathic personality traits that may be evidenced in some children. Bearing in mind that personality traits begin early in development and are often enduring, the identification of psychopathic traits and CU traits in children becomes important in predicting offending behaviour.

To date, studies investigating the presence of CU traits in children have revealed several important findings. Frick and colleagues investigated the type of antisocial behaviour displayed by children with high and low levels of CU traits who also had

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conduct problems (Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003). They found that those children who had high levels of CU traits engaged in more severe, frequent, and varied offending than those who had conduct problems but low CU traits. They also investigated the type of aggression used by both groups of children and found that children high in CU traits used more proactive aggression than those low in CU traits, who tended to display more reactive aggression. This is in keeping with research into psychopathy amongst adult offenders, which suggests more instrumental and premeditated patterns of aggression (Frick, 1998). The same study showed that offending by those children high in CU traits was more likely to continue into adulthood – i.e. it was more stable over time. Similar results were found in recent studies that examined the stability of psychopathic features over a 6 year period during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Loney, Taylor, Butler, & Iacono, 2007) and the stability of interpersonal callousness over a 9 year period from childhood to adolescence (Obradovic, Pardini, Long, & Loeber, 2007).

A reward-dominant response style and fearlessness were also found to be higher in children behaving antisocially who were high in CU traits than in children behaving antisocially who were low in CU traits (Barry, Frick, DeShazo, McCoy, Ellis, & Loney, 2000; O'Brien & Frick, 1996). These factors may indicate underlying deficits in behavioural inhibition, an important construct in the development of empathy. Additionally, the same children were found to show lower levels of anxiety, as well as being less distressed by their behaviour (Barry et al., 2000). Children high in CU traits were also found to have higher levels of delinquent peer associations than those low in CU traits (Kimonis, Frick, & Barry, 2004).

Many of the studies described above replicate the same patterns found in antisocial adults who score high on

psychopathy. It appears that it is not only the presence of antisocial behaviour and impulsivity that delineates those most at risk of repeat offending, but also high levels of CU traits. CU traits, therefore, may also be used as a reliable indicator of psychopathy in children who display antisocial behaviour, providing a measurable construct that can help identify children at high risk of career offending.

The Development of Callous-Unemotional Traits

CU traits can be viewed broadly as a pattern of low empathy, guilt, and concern, combined with a propensity towards superficial charm. The origins of these traits appear to lie with the under-development of appropriate behavioural controls (Frick, 1998). Low behavioural inhibition, or self-control, is a temperamental characteristic defined physiologically by deficits in autonomic nervous system arousal and behaviourally by the failure to inhibit antisocial actions. Behavioural elements of this temperamental style include poor responsiveness to signs of punishment, and low fearfulness to new or threatening situations (Kagan & Snidman, 1991). Temperament plays a fundamental role in children's internalisation of parental and societal values (Kochanska, 1994), and therefore the presence of a temperament that is marked by deficits in responsiveness and autonomic arousal suggests that development of empathy and concern for others may be hindered.

Several studies have highlighted the durability of temperamental factors and the impact they may have on a person's long-term outcome. Caspi (2000) examined participants from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Study, comparing their temperaments at age 3 to their personalities and life outcomes at ages 18 and 21. Based on testing undertaken when the participants were 3 years old, they were divided roughly into three groups based on temperament: well-adjusted, inhibited, and undercontrolled. Children in the

undercontrolled group were found to be more likely in adulthood to score low on measures of self-control and harm avoidance, and high on measures of aggression. Additionally, they were more likely to be diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder and substance use disorders as adults (Caspi, 2000). When measures of illegal behaviour and criminal activity were compared, it was found that adults who were in the undercontrolled group tended to engage in criminal acts more frequently, and by committing a wider variety of criminal acts, than those in the other two groups. The results from Caspi's study seem to indicate that early temperamental styles have some impact on later personality and outcomes in adults, including criminality.

Temperament may play another important role in the development of particular traits. Kochanska (1994, 1997) suggested that a child's temperament acts as a moderator between parenting and socialisation. Successful socialisation of rules and expectations is thought to be a key part of a child's development of conscience. Essentially, an individual's conscience is displayed through the expression of empathy and guilt. If that conscience is underdeveloped, the individual may lack the necessary empathy to prevent him or her from causing harm to others, and lack sufficient guilt about harming others to decrease the likelihood that this would occur again. Hare's (1996, 1999) extensive research has repeatedly identified lack of empathy and guilt as being central to the concept of psychopathy, and so it logically follows that the basis of this may lie in early socialisation practices.

Parenting Practices and Callous-Unemotional Traits

As parents are the main providers of socialisation at an early age, inadequacies in parental practices may have an effect on a child's development of antisocial behaviour. In their meta-analysis, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986, cited in Frick,

1998) identified two key elements of socialisation: parental supervision and involvement in their child's day to day life. The failure to provide adequate parental practices in these areas puts children at higher risk of developing antisocial behaviours, or may exacerbate existing problem behaviours.

Parental disciplining is another facet of parenting style that has been linked to antisocial behaviour in children. Discipline can be viewed as a direct attempt to socialise children (Frick, 1998). By being disciplined when they transgress social rules of conduct, children begin to associate inappropriate behaviours with punishment and consequent fear of punishment. This in turn teaches them to inhibit their behaviour and learn self-control, in addition to learning general rules of acceptable conduct that are then internalised. Kochanska (1994, 1997) described the way by which parental discipline interacts with a child's temperament in terms of socialisation. He suggested that in order for parents to effectively socialise their children, their style of discipline must match their child's temperament. For children who are particularly fearful, a gentle approach to discipline appears to work best – if the child's anxiety is too high while being corrected it is suggested that this fear prevents effective internalisation of behaviour. On the other hand, if a child is rather fearless, the optimum arousal of anxiety may not be instigated with gentle discipline. However, overly punitive discipline tended to result in an active rejection of parental efforts, and a general failure to adequately internalise rules of conduct (Kochanska, 1994, 1997). Instead, it is suggested that a more effective method for promoting socialisation and conscience development in fearless children is for parents to focus on positive interactions rather than using punishment for negative interactions.

Research has found that parents of antisocial children tend to use more harsh

forms of discipline, and to be less consistent in their use of discipline (Shelton, Frick, & Wootton, 1996). Inconsistencies in discipline may lead children to fail to associate discipline with a particular behaviour, while overly harsh discipline can lead a child to focus purely on the punishment and to fail to internalise the message behind it. Both of these outcomes may lead to a failure to be adequately socialised to societal and parental values, which in turn leads to low self-control (Shelton, Frick, & Wootton, 1996). While studies have shown that harsh and/or inconsistent discipline is associated with increased antisocial behaviour, some researchers have found that children high on measures of psychopathy may be less influenced by this (Edens, Skopp, & Cahill, 2008; Wootton, Frick, Shelton & Silverthorn, 1997) – in that ineffective parenting plays less of a moderating role in antisocial behaviour that is exhibited by those children high in CU traits. While this provides additional evidence for the proposed discrimination between two groups of children who show antisocial behaviour (those high in CU traits and those low in CU traits), it also indicates that this information needs to be considered when family-based interventions are proposed.

It can be seen that there is a combination of factors that may put children at risk of antisocial and offending behaviour. Children whose antisocial behaviours start early in life are more at risk of following a chronic and severe trajectory of offending behaviour into adulthood (Frick, 1998). However, not all of these children go on to become career criminals. Studies have shown that the presence of psychopathic traits can delineate a particular subgroup of children with conduct problems who are most at risk. CU traits in particular appear to be a reliable predictor of this group (Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003; Frick, O'Brien, Wootton, & McBurnett 1994).

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