

Identifying Future Troubled Teens and Adults in Childhood

Problems such as aggression, oppositional behavior, stealing, and truancy are among the most persistent forms of childhood behavior problems. Additionally, they are associated with a broad array of negative outcomes, including poor school performance, problems with relationships, trouble with the law, poor mental health, and employment difficulties in adolescence and adulthood.

However, it is very difficult to identify children at greatest risk of such negative outcomes. Such early identification is important because if we understand the developmental patterns that lead to maladjustment, we can detect children at risk and implement interventions to prevent the ultimate outcome.

We designed a longitudinal study to learn whether there are groups of children who follow deviant developmental pathways of disruptive behavior throughout childhood, and whether these children can be distinguished from those who follow non-deviant developmental pathways of disruptive behavior.

Our study included 2,076 Dutch children. We assessed their behavior five times at two-year intervals between ages 4 and 18, relying on parental reporting of four types of behavior problems:

- Aggression (assault, fights, bullying, cruelty)
- Opposition (having a temper, being defiant and annoying, arguing with others, being stubborn or sensitive)
- Property violations (cruelty to animals, setting fires, lying, vandalizing or stealing property)
- Status violations (running away, skipping school, abusing drugs or alcohol, swearing)

Using sophisticated analytic methods, we identified four groups of children and adolescents who showed different developmental pathways from ages 4 through 18:

- Persistent high, i.e., parents reported more disruptive behaviors for these children throughout childhood and adolescence than other parents.
- Persistent low, i.e., parents reported their child showed no or only a few disruptive behaviors throughout childhood and adolescence.
- Decreasing, i.e., parents reported more disruptive behavior in childhood than in adolescence.
- Adolescent-increasing, i.e., parents reported no or only a few disruptive behaviors in childhood, but increasing numbers of disruptive behaviors in adolescence.

Although the pattern of disruptive behaviors was the same for boys and girls from ages 4 to 18, more boys (8%) than girls (5%) followed high-level

trajectories of aggression, property violations, and status violations. Additionally, the high-level trajectories indicated that the most troublesome children in childhood tended to be the most troublesome adolescents.

Despite claims in the literature that a majority of adolescents may exhibit increases in antisocial behavior, we only found increasing trajectories for oppositional behavior and status violations (6 and 23 percent, respectively), among the adolescents. However, these adolescents did not reach the negative outcomes found in the persistent high group.

The findings of this study show that trajectories of deviance behavior problems in children and youth may one way to identify development going awry.

Our findings of the absence of a large group of adolescents with an increase in antisocial behavior across the board may have implications for theories on disruptive behavior problems. Such theories assume that there are large groups of individuals who show a peak of antisocial behaviors in adolescence. Since we could not find evidence of such a large group in this study, existing theories may need to be redefined.

Future studies should demonstrate the significance of the identified developmental pathways as markers of future negative outcomes such as young adult delinquency, psychopathology, and social functioning.

Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 75, Issue 5, *Developmental Trajectories of Externalizing Behaviors in Childhood and Adolescence* by I.L. Bongers, H.M. Koot, J. Van der Ende and F.C. Verhulst. Copyright 2004 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.