

## How does Aggressive Parenting Affect Child Development and Personality? A Systematic Review

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to examine the negative affects of aggressive parenting on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children across cultures and socioeconomic status. Multiple relevant and current disciplinary journals will be reviewed for the purpose of this study. Studies have shown that the effects of harsh and aggressive parenting can cause problematic behavioral issues in children. In this literature review, the focus will be directed toward the specific developmental factors being affected by aggressive parenting styles. The increase in aggressive behavior of children and of the parents will also be considered. The effects of stress, socioeconomic status, and cultural background on parenting styles will be examined for causation of aggressive parenting which leads to antisocial behavior in children. Finally, the view of long-term effects and psychopathology in adults who were raised in an environment where parenting was harsh and aggressive will be discussed. Studies have shown that harsh parenting can lead to difficulties in school, work, and self-reliant success. Self-efficacy and motivation can be stifled by a non-nurturing parenting style, which leads to complications in social and emotional interaction in adulthood.*

**Keywords:** *Aggressive parenting, harsh parenting, children's anti-social behavior*

### 1. Introduction

Family environments saturated with behavioral patterns of rejection, coldness, and non-acceptance foster maladjustment in children and adults. This pattern will lead to internalizing and externalizing negative emotions and behaviors. Studies have shown that parental acceptance and warmth is related to empathy and pro-social behaviors in children and young adults (Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011). The notion that children become dependent in the interpersonal interaction of their birth parents in a reward dependent system has been evolving since the 1980's. We see this idea discussed and evaluated by popular theorists such as Erickson and Cloninger. Though the biological predisposition of a child plays a role in the re-activity of the parent,

studies have shown that a parent who perceives their child to be generally pleasant and maintains a nurturing disposition in spite of a difficult infant will see positive results by the time the child is two years old. In these parenting situations, the child learns to trust the positive regard of the caregiver and will continuously develop confidence into the toddler stage. When a parent perceives the infant to be difficult and generally unpleasant, their reaction can be harsh verbal or physical punishment and sometimes neglect and isolation. In this type of parenting situation, the child becomes anxious, never knowing what to expect from the parent. When the child develops into the toddler stage, they have nurtured this anxious behavior which has caused them to act out in self defense. When children in these

situations act out negatively, it can elicit harsh parenting and corporal punishment (Hajal, Neiderhiser, Moore, et al., 2015). This type of disorganized attachment can cause negative short and long-term effects in both parent and child. The result of chaotic interaction between parent and child, usually when the child is being abused, can be impaired neural and cognitive functioning, which can cause academic failure, difficulty regulating emotions, and a tendency toward interpersonal violence (Siegel & Hartzell, 2014).

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to acquire a comprehensive understanding of various factors influencing parenting patterns, with particular focus on harsh parenting and its influence on the behavioral pattern of children. The literature also includes the study of differential impacts, if any, based on the gender of parents and children, as well as a family’s social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

**Method**

The databases that were used to search eligible studies are as follows: NCBI, EBSCO and ProQuest. In each database, the same keywords were used but were modified according to the type of database. I found 4350 articles from SAGE, 84943 from EBSCO, 311844 from ScienceDirect, 55 references list, and 8864 from ProQuest . The search strategy included the following keywords: harsh parenting, impact on children, parent-child relationship, parenting behavior, parent child psychopathology, parental discipline and intervention programs. Many duplicate articles were found and 35562 such articles were excluded, in addition to 3675 articles that were based on underage parents or parents who were not primary caretakers of children. Almost 24501 irrelevant articles were also excluded, which were expert opinions from child psychiatrists or commentaries. All the articles that have been used for this paper are relevant to the research topic. Since the topic has been subjected to innumerable studies, therefore it was not difficult to find

appropriate articles for this paper. Two articles and one thesis were unobtainable. Based on the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP), quality assessment criteria were formed to study the methodologies and study patterns of each article. The articles were also verified by a second independent reviewer. After quality assessment, 58 articles were excluded, as only high to moderate quality studies were included, and so the final list consists of 63 articles (Fig 1).

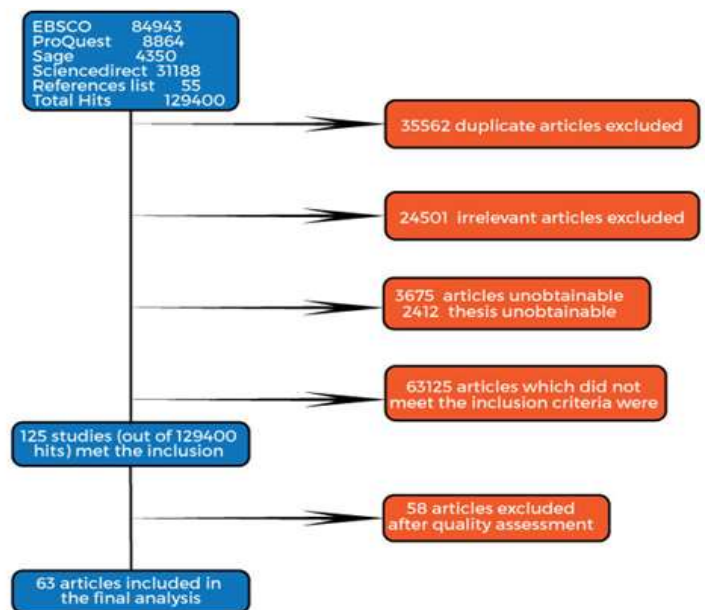


Fig 1: Flowchart of study selection process and search results.

**2. Harsh Parenting Affects Self Efficacy and Motivation**

Self differentiation starts as a personal process and progresses into the transformation of relationships in the entire family system (Becvar & Becvar, 2013). The idea of human nature behind the cognitive-behavioral aspect is that we have all created a way of thinking about the environment that dictates the way we behave in any given situation. We are not motivated by our instinctive drives, but, rather, by the cognitive constructs we have developed due to our experiences; we are all rational beings and authors of our own stories (Schultz & Schultz, 2008). Defense mechanisms have long been considered a process of

adaptation. These mechanisms can be unconscious, non-intentional, hierarchical, and associated with pathology. There can be immature and mature versions which are seen in individuals of all ages. In children, defense mechanisms are arranged developmentally, with immature defenses appearing first, and in adulthood, they are arranged hierarchically, with the most adaptive or mature appearing first (Cramer, 2000).

### **3. Psychopathology and Developmental Factors Affected by Harsh Parenting**

The view of psychopathology has to do with what kind of affect an individual's thoughts are having on their ability to be fully functional on a daily basis (Sherman, Blevins, Kirchner, Ridener, & Jackson, 2008). A person able to function on a normal to high level, including healthy interpersonal interaction, good performance at work, and the ability to maintain moderate health levels, is considered to be congruent. Psychopathology is a progression, not a state which appears without warning from one moment to the next. The congruent individual does not depend on positive regard and is free to spend their lives self actualizing or living up to what they consider to be their highest level of potential self (Vetere, 2001). Psychopathology is seen as incongruence, which causes the individual to embark on an exhausting quest for positive regard throughout their lives (Corey, 2013). Individuals who are constantly seeking positive regard are forced to live lives that are not true to themselves, in order to gain the approval of others; they are always on the defensive and cannot be open to all experiences. These individuals will usually have self-destructive tendencies, anxiety, panic, and depression. Because their lives are not at a fully functioning status and their authenticity is under constant threat, their state becomes neurotic and anxious. Eventually, the defense mechanisms they developed early on in life that worked in the beginning will no longer work, functioning becomes unpredictable, and they become psychologically vulnerable (Schultz & Schultz,

2008).

In Western society, family violence is an area that can be overlooked, depending on the situation and the culture. In many cultures, certain things are considered to be abuse, where another culture would typically see that same sort of treatment as normal because of what they were raised to believe. The tolerance of abuse tends to be taught in families from generation to generation, which makes it a familial norm, though, according to research, this does not change the adverse affects of harsh or abusive parenting. Children raised in these conditions still struggle to meet societal norms or flourish on their own in society (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2011).

Research has shown that a child's family environment, along with other biological predisposition, plays a major role in the appearance of ADD/ADHD symptomology. In some cases, a child is diagnosed with ADD at an early age as part of biological predisposition, while in other cases a child is diagnosed with the disorder in direct correlation to a high-risk or unstable family environment (Johnston & Mash, 2001). Furthermore, there have been reviews which suggested that with or without medication, parent training programs reduced symptoms of ADHD in children, which suggests that a change in parenting styles can prevent, reduce, or eliminate the symptoms and progression of the diagnosis (Kaslow, Broth, Smith, & Collins, 2012).

### **4. Defense Mechanisms Related to Anxiety and SES**

Anxiety is not simply an isolated event or something that can be guarded against in a parent and child relationship. Research shows that when the caregiver is experiencing high levels of anxiety, they are not as able to offer a nurturing relationship to their child. Major sources of anxiety include: financial instability, low socioeconomic status, marital discord, and chronic health issues. When one or several of these factors

are present in an individual's life, the levels of stress become increasingly problematic. Adults with elevated levels of stress due to these concerns struggle in their ability to parent a problematic or difficult child in a way that is not harsh, aggressive, or cold (Collins & Arthur, 2007). When a child experiences anxiety and is unable to deal with it on their own due to an aggressive upbringing, they will default to a fight or flight response. This type of response can manifest in physical outbursts, screaming, self harm, or self-isolation. The same anxious reactions occur when there is a threat to self-esteem, and they have adapted to these situations by using defense mechanisms to defend against these threats (Schultz & Schultz, 2008). Defense mechanisms work to control moments and feelings of anxiety, and, since anxiety is related to fear, a pattern of reactions is created that will occur whenever this fear returns. In adults, an immature defense mechanism falls low on the hierarchical order and is considered to be action or acting out and expressing behaviors, not limited to apathy, withdrawal, and passive aggression. Immature defense mechanisms in adulthood manifest as poor coping mechanisms. Adults who were abused as children but were not able to face the experience will continue the same pattern of abuse in their own children. Without the proper nurturing environment, adults will rely on the abuse of substances, alcohol, erratic behavior, and self destruction as a way of coping with anxiety (Cramer, 2000).

### **5. Factors Influencing Parenting Behaviour**

Wharton & Mandell (1985) have focused on the impact of violence portrayed on television on parental aggressiveness. The authors have studied the reports of two cases where children were admitted in emergency rooms due to inflicted violence by their parents immediately after broadcast of a film depicting a single mother suffocating her child.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the

external factors that influence the behavioral patterns of parents. Researchers have established a connection between cultural background of parents and their attitude toward children (Ortega, 2000). Based on a questionnaire distributed to 54 low-income mothers from various cultural backgrounds, it was concluded that mothers with high cultural connections exhibit less aggressiveness toward their children than their counterparts who have low cultural connections. In another study, it was concluded that the impact of harsh parenting differs according to cultural and ethnic groups. Dodge (2001) has observed that children from white families show more aggressiveness than children from African-American families, considering that both groups have experienced harsh treatment from their parents. However, it was also seen that extreme harsh behavior with children, including strict physical discipline, has the same level of negative impacts on children, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds. In the context of racial background, Lee (2013) has concluded that adolescent motherhood gives rise to harsh parenting, although its impact on parental practices differs according to race and ethnicity.

In another study, Yaman et al. (2010) have explored the difference between the levels of influence of marital problems and parental distress on the conduct levels of children in Dutch and second-generation Turkish migrant families. It was observed that the results were same for both groups.

It is also suggested that parental behavior and children's characteristics are mutually influential, as observed by Simons et al. (1994), based on their study of 207 divorced women and their children. While single mothers can impact externalizing of boys and girls, and internalizing of boys, non-residential fathers can influence externalizing of both genders. On the other hand, externalizing problems in children can reduce parental involvement of both parents. In a similar context, Erath et al. (2009) have studied 251



children of eight and nine years old. The authors have concluded that harsh parenting can increase externalizing problems more for children with lower skin conductance level reactivity (SCLR) than children with higher SCLR.

It has also been observed that characteristics of parents can induce harsh parenting, for example, parents who are less skilled in conducting executive functions display less tolerance level for tantrum throwing children compared to more skilled parents (Deater-Deckard et al., 2012). In a particular study of 368 mothers, Pinderhughes et al. (2001) have found that parental warmth and consistent discipline are influenced by race and ethnicity. For instance, they concluded parental warmth is more evident among European American parents than African American parents, and also, the latter display less consistent discipline with their children. Such results have, however, been contradicted by Amato and Fowler (2002), who have studied two groups of parents – one group having children between 5 and 11 years, and another group having adolescent children between 12 and 18 years. The authors have found that there is no association between cultural, racial and economic variations and parenting practices.

The impact of incarceration on harsh parenting has been studied by Mustaine and Tewksbury (2015), and it was concluded that incarceration separately has no influence, since fathers' parental practices depend on factors like scope of interaction with their children, and such scope is defined by many elements, like marital status and economic status, among which incarceration is one element.

## **6. Parental Psychopathology and Parental Practices**

Studies have been conducted to learn the impact of different types of parental psychopathology on children's behavioral patterns (Harvey et al., 2011; Psychogiou et al., 2008). In response to questionnaires given to 182 mothers and 126

fathers, all of whom had preschool children with behavioral problems, it was concluded that negative traits like depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and so on in parents can induce them to behave in a less responsible manner with their children (Harvey et al., 2011). In addition, it was observed that marital status has no impact on the association between parental psychopathology and their attitude toward their children. Psychogiou et al. (2008) have found that parental psychopathology is reflected in reduced empathy toward their children and increased egoistic attitude. In another study, Stokes et al. (2011) have argued that there is less severe impact of parental depression on parent-child discrepancies. The impact of parental psychopathology on the effects of parent management training (PMT) has been studied by Maliken and Katz (2013). The authors have reviewed different research articles based on this relationship between parental psychopathology and PMT. Based on the assessment of 70 parents from a control group and 72 parents from an experimental group, Li et al. (2013) have concluded that parents in the experimental group were less severe on their children, resulting in establishing a more positive relationship with their children compared to their counterparts from the control group.

Knerr et al. (2013) have studied random trials based on parents and primary caretakers of children up to the age of 18 years. The authors have concluded that parental intervention programs have a positive effect on parental practices and can reduce child maltreatment in low and middle-income countries. According to Jansen et al. (2012), intervention programs should be initiated in early childhood or even before birth, and especially for socially and psychologically disadvantaged families.

Based on research on 70 fourth grade students, Caron et al. (2006) have studied the controlling power of parents and its impact on the behavioral patterns of children. Parents who indulge in more controlling power have children with internal

behavioral problems, and this is more evident when the parents' warmth level is low. In another context, it is assumed that aggressive behavior of G2 parents is a result of their experience as children from G1 parents. Conger et al. (2003) have studied 75 youth along with their parents and children to conclude aggressive parenthood gets transmitted from G1 parents to G2 parents. However, one limitation of this study was that it did not consider the social and economic backgrounds of the participants.

Parental mentalization is a factor, which, if disturbed, can reduce the mentalization capacity in children. This can result in long-term emotional problems in children (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). Another study focused on depressed and non-depressed mothers (Kohl et al., 2011). The authors have concluded that a harsh attitude was displayed equally by both groups, but a neglectful attitude and emotional abuse are more evident in depressed mothers than their non-depressed counterparts.

Mackenbach et al. (2014) have focused on a mild degree of harsh parenting to conclude that it adversely affects the behavioral and emotional patterns of children, and the level of impact is indistinguishable in the case of paternal or maternal harsh discipline. A study conducted on 807 Chinese adolescents revealed that fathers are perceived as less concerned and more disciplined than mothers (Shek, 2000).

## 7. Influence on the Behavioral Patterns of Children

Gavita and Joyce (2008) have explored the influence of parenting intervention programs on the level of conduct problems in children. The authors have studied both English and non-English articles based on controlled and quasi-randomized trials that have included parenting intervention programs having parents with disturbed characteristics. It was concluded that such programs have the significant effect of reducing the stress levels of both parents and

children, and the effect remains consistent, even after three years of the program. This result has also been substantiated by Thomas and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007), after studying meta-analysis results between 1980 and 2004.

Pederson and Fite (2014) have found that parental intervention has a significant influence on the association between the aggressiveness of children and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). After studying 89 children between 9 to 12 years and their primary caregivers, the authors have concluded that consistent discipline implemented by parents can discourage children from behaving in a defiant manner, thus reducing the association between aggressiveness and ODD. A similar study was conducted on 68 Chinese children and their parents (Chen et al., 2001). This study revealed that the characteristics of children are also an influential factor on the impact of parental behavior toward their children. It was observed that while maternal warmth can reduce aggressiveness in obedient children, paternal control has more impact on defiant children.

Evans et al. (2012) have observed 199 mothers and their perspectives regarding their children's aggressiveness and shyness. Mothers who show a high level of confidence in dealing with their aggressive or shy children can influence their aggressive level, though not their shyness. Xu et al. (2009) have studied 401 children to learn that aggression in children increases, the higher the level of harsh parenting, although aggression can be controlled by efforts taken by children.

The impact of harsh parenting on children was studied by Whelan et al. (2014), and they have concluded that harsh parenting can induce children, especially boys, to become victims of bullying. The impact of harsh parenting on deviant peer affiliation among adolescents has been studied by Li et al. (2015), who have concluded that harsh parenting can develop deviant peer affiliation among adolescents and is further differentiated by genetic or non-genetic

factors. Waller et al. (2012) have concluded that harsh parenting induces deceitful-callous behavior in early childhood, although the impact is diluted in the long term, even if the behavior is sustained. In a similar study, McKee et al. (2007) have observed 2,582 parents, to conclude that parents use more harsh discipline and physical power on boys than girls, and fathers exert more physical power. Such parenting can cause negative behavioral patterns in children, irrespective of their gender. In the context of harsh discipline and permissive discipline, Parent et al. (2011) have studied 160 parents with potentially disruptive children. It was concluded that while harsh discipline adversely affects both genders, permissive discipline adversely affects only boys. Therefore, the authors have suggested that parental training programs can benefit children of either gender by teaching parental guidance to their parents.

The ability of children to establish relationships with their social circle has been studied in the context of parenting behaviors. In this study, Goraya and Kazim (2012) have observed that harsh parenting can reduce the social skills of children, while positive parenting can increase their social skills. Lack of social skills itself can be a negative predictor of children's behavior, irrespective of parenting practices (Goraya & Shamama-tus-Sabah, 2013).

In the context of corporal punishment, Simons et al. (1994) have found that it is the degree of parental involvement associated with such punishment that influences behavioral outcomes in children rather than corporal punishment alone.

In another study of parental gender, Chang et al. (2003) concluded that maternal parenting affects emotional outcomes of children, while paternal parenting affects aggressiveness in children. Moreover, fathers have more influence on sons than daughters, while there is no such differentiation in the case of mothers. Further, the influence of negative parenting on children's

depression level induced by physical punishment has been proved positive by Callender et al. (2012).

## 8. Impact of Parental Stress and Anxiety

It is a given fact that raising children can be a cumbersome task for many parents, especially those with other problems like divorce or suffering from mental problems like anxiety and depression. Research on 430 children with and without externalizing behavior problems has revealed that various factors like divorced parents, maternal psychopathology, and also aggressive children, can increase parenting stress (Williford et al., 2007). Moreover, anxiety among parents has a positive relationship with anxiety and depression level in children but has no effect on their externalizing problems, as concluded by Burstein et al. (2010), after they had studied 48 anxiety-ridden parents and 49 parents not suffering from anxiety. They have further observed that anxiety in parents has an adverse impact on their relationship with their children. In the case of adoptive fathers and birth mothers, it has been seen that the higher the level of aggressiveness in the former, the higher is the negative parenting from the latter (Hajal et al., 2015). El-Sheikh and Elmore-Staton (2004) have concluded that conflict between parents and children can abate the adverse impact of marital conflict of parents on children. Again, positive parent-child relationship can reduce behavioral problems in children, which is linked with marital conflict. Mustillo et al. (2011) have found that parental depression can cause neglectful behavior, causing negative outcomes on children below adolescence. However, depression does not imply increased physical abuse for any age of children. Bender et al. (2007) have studied adolescents of 16 years to conclude that harsh parenting can develop depression and greater externalizing behavior in them. The authors have further observed that maternal harshness, which is caused by parenting tension and family problems (Pereira et al., 2015) discourages adolescents to maintain

warm interactions with them. The positive relationship between parenting stress and disruptive behavior in children has also been supported by Barry et al. (2005). In another study by Maljaars et al. (2013) on two groups of mothers having children with and without autism, it was revealed that the former group used less discipline on their children than the latter group.

## 9. Conclusion

These findings emphasize several aspects of parenting and its impact on the behavioral patterns of children, and also the influence of children's perception of parenting on parental stress and anxiety. In sum, from the findings in the above chosen set of literature, it can be assumed that children's aggression, shyness or feelings of confidence correspond to the challenges that parents feel regarding their approach and attitude toward children. The cultural impact on parenting styles has been explored and it is evident from the findings that cultural backgrounds definitely play a role in a child's upbringing. This has, however, been contradicted by Amato and Fowler (2002), and this emphasizes the fact that more cross-sectional studies are needed to obtain more confirmed results.

One interesting finding has revealed that parenting styles can be hereditary, as observed by Conger et al. (2003), by the fact that parents tend to give the same kind of treatment to their children that they received from their own parents. This brings to the fore the observation that any adverse impact of parenting on one generation is hardly taken into consideration when it is the turn of this generation to become parents.

The impact of parental training programs has been another element in this study, and it has been comprehensively proved that such programs have a positive impact on parent-child relationships, as well as on the behavioral patterns of children, irrespective of gender. Moreover, although parental attitude may vary according to the gender of the child, the impact is not gender related, as

has been proven by McKee et al. (2007).

One important fact has been found by El-Sheikh and Elmore-Staton (2004), that the impacts of parents' marital conflicts on children become diluted if the parent-child relationship is in conflict.

The number of studies regarding the topic of parenting styles and their impact on children's emotional behavior is huge, and this current paper has focused on a few of them. Therefore, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive review of this issue, as further studies are required. However, an important fact that can be concluded from the findings here is that while parental attitudes can positively or negatively affect a child's behavior, the reverse is also true, i.e. the attitude of children can influence the impact of parenting (Chen et al., 2001).

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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