The Relationship Between Parental Alcoholism and Adolescent Adjustment: The Mediating Role of Adolescent-Parent Communication

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Abstract

The primary goal of the present study was to explore whether adolescent-parent communication (mother and father) significantly mediates the relationship between parental alcoholism (paternal and maternal) and adolescent adjustment (as indicated by depression, anxiety, and alcohol use). Surveys were administered to 1,001 adolescents in the spring of 2007 and 2008. Paternal problem drinking significantly predicted alcohol and drug use for boys, but not for girls. In contrast, maternal problem drinking significantly predicted drug use for girls, but not for boys. For both parents, paternal (maternal) problem drinking also indirectly predicted anxiety via negative adolescent-father (mother) communication. In contrast, for girls, maternal problem drinking indirectly predicted depression and anxiety via negative adolescent-mother communication. These results underscore the need to consider both the gender of the adolescent and the gender of the parent when examining parental problem drinking and the adolescent-parent relationship.

Measures

Adolescent Anxiety. The Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED; Birmaher et al., 1995) was used to measure adolescent anxiety. This measure includes 41 items that are completed in reference to the prior three months. A sample item is “I get really frightened for no reason at all.” The response scale ranges from 0 = not true or hardly ever true to 2 = very true or often true. Items may be summed to reflect overall level of anxiety symptomatology. Prior research has indicated that the SCARED has good reliability and validity characteristics (Birmaher et al., 2003). In the present sample, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the SCARED total score was .94.

Adolescent Depression. The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC; Weissman et al., 1980) was used to assess adolescent depressive symptomatology. A representative CES-DC item is “I felt sad.” Individuals respond to the CES-DC items in relation to how they felt or acted during the past week. The response scale is a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 4 = a lot. In this study, the 20 CES-DC items were summed to create a total score. The CES-DC has been reported to have good psychometric properties (Faulstich et al., 1986). The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the CES-DC total score in this sample was .91.

Adolescent Alcohol Use. The adolescents were asked to report how much, on the average, the day they usually drank (beer, wine, or liquor) in the last six months. They also were asked to report how often they usually had a drink (beer, wine, or liquor) in the last six months. Based on these questions, a total alcohol quantity x frequency score was calculated. Because this score was positively skewed, the logarithmic transformation was used.

Adolescent Drug Use. The youth also were asked how frequently they had used marijuana, sedatives, stimulants, inhalants, hallucinogens, cocaine or crack, and opiates in the last 6 months. The response scale ranged from 0 = no use to 7 = every day. A total drug use score was calculated by summing the scores of the seven different types of drugs. Because this score was positively skewed, the logarithmic transformation was used.

Procedures

In the spring of 2007, adolescents who provided assent, and who had parental consent, were administered a self-report survey in their school by trained research personnel. The survey took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, the adolescents were given a movie pass. Participants were invited to participate again the following spring.

Results

SEM Results for Boys

The model for boys fit the data extremely well ($χ^2$ = 8.99, $p = .70$, NFI = .97, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00). Significant direct paths were observed between paternal problem drinking and boys’ alcohol use (β = .18, $p < .01$), and between paternal problem drinking and boys’ drug use (β = -.17, $p < .01$) (see Figure 1). Indirect effects also were found. As shown in Figure 1, both paternal problem drinking and maternal problem drinking negatively predicted adolescent-father communication (β = -.17, $p < .01$; β = -.13, $p < .05$), respectively. In turn, adolescent-father communication negatively predicted boys’ anxiety symptomatology (β = -.15, $p < .05$) and adolescent-mother communication negatively predicted boys’ depressive symptomatology (β = -.18, $p < .01$) (see Figure 1).

SEM Results for Girls

The model for girls also fit the data quite well ($χ^2$ = 14.41, $p = .42$, NFI = .95, CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .01). For girls, a significant direct path between maternal problem drinking and girls’ drug use was found (β = .14, $p < .01$). Indirect effects also were observed. As shown in Figure 2, maternal problem drinking negatively predicted adolescent-father communication (β = -.13, $p < .05$), adolescent-mother communication, in turn, negatively predicted girls’ depressive symptomatology (β = -.33, $p < .001$) and girls’ anxiety symptomatology (β = -.19, $p < .01$). As shown in Figure 2, paternal problem drinking negatively predicted adolescent-father communication (β = -.18, $p < .01$).

Conclusions

Results from this study are consistent with a relatively large literature indicating that children of alcoholic parents (COAs) are at an elevated risk for psychosocial problems. Findings from this study also extend the literature by suggesting that the same-sex parent is relatively more important in the transmission of this risk. For boys, paternal problem drinking predicted substance use (alcohol and drug use), whereas maternal problem drinking did not. The reverse pattern was observed for girls. That is, maternal problem drinking predicted predicted substance use (drug use), whereas paternal problem drinking did not. Moreover, adolescent-father communication played an indirect role in the relationship between paternal problem drinking and internalizing problems for boys, whereas adolescent-mother communication played an indirect role in this relationship for girls. These findings are consistent with Social Learning Theory, which suggests that children are more likely to emulate same-sex role models than opposite-sex role models. These findings also underscore the importance of considering both the gender of the parent and the gender of the adolescent when examining the adolescent-parent relationship.

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