

Division 37 Section on Child Maltreatment
Dissertation Award Winner

The Effects of Child Maltreatment and Environmental Stability on Children's Trajectories of Aggressive Behavior

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Aggression peaks during early childhood and declines steadily over time (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003). Not all children follow this general developmental pattern, however. Rather, although most children exhibit either a declining pattern of aggression or are generally non-aggressive throughout childhood, a minority (0%-18%) are persistently aggressive (e.g., Brame, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2001). What determines which children are chronically aggressive? In my dissertation, funded in part by a generous Division 37 Section on Child Maltreatment Dissertation Award, I am examining how maltreatment experiences and the stability of a child's home environment affect patterns of childhood aggression in sample of urban children.

Child maltreatment is often linked with increased aggression across the lifespan (e.g., Widom, Schuck, & White, 2006). Theoretically, this link may be explained by social learning (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), information processing biases (Burks, Laird, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999), and deficiencies in emotion regulation capacities (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003). Only one study to date has examined the effect of maltreatment on developmental *patterns* of aggression (vs. aggression observed a single time point, which has been extensively studied). Odgers and colleagues (2007) found that maltreated men were 6.7 to 14.5 times more likely to be chronically aggressive than to be non-aggressive across the lifespan. Implicit in theories that explain maltreatment's effects on aggression is the idea that maltreatment is often an indicator of larger patterns of chronically unstable family environments (e.g., changing primary caregivers, changing residences, financial struggles, exposure to adult deviance and aggression). Although child maltreatment and unstable home environments might often co-occur, this is not always the case. Almost no research to date has examined longitudinal *patterns* of environmental

stability, much less how those patterns interact with other risk factors (e.g., maltreatment) to influence developmental patterns of aggression. Extending our understanding of the complex, dynamic developmental effects of maltreatment requires exploring how children's environments change across childhood rather than relying on static snapshots.

My dissertation extends prior research by examining the independent and interactive effects of maltreatment and patterns of environmental stability on children's patterns of aggression over time. The data come from the Capella Project, part of the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN) consortium, which followed children annually from when they were 4 years old or younger. Caregivers were interviewed annually about children's aggression and a variety of indicators of unstable environments (e.g., residential, financial, caregiver stability). I am using growth mixture modeling techniques (Muthén, 2001) to identify latent classes of aggression and environmental stability patterns from ages 4 to 12 years. Preliminary results reveal that patterns of aggression in this sample are similar to those reported in other samples; that is, there are clearly identifiable groups of children who display patterns of either decreasing aggression, non-aggression, or relatively high aggression throughout childhood. I am honored to have been selected to receive the Section's dissertation award and look forward to sharing more results soon.

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