

The Influence of Anxiety and Depression Symptoms on Parental Monitoring and Adolescents' Risky Behaviors



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Purpose

Adolescence is a developmental period associated with increases in anxiety, depression, and risky behavior (Bray, Adams, Getz, & Stovall, 2010; Merkangas et al., 2010). Parental monitoring is known to lower rates of risk-taking (Bacchini et al., 2011), with female adolescents reporting more parental monitoring than males (Webb, Bray, Getz, & Adams, 2002), and mothers reporting more knowledge about youths' activities than fathers (Bumpus, Crouter, & McHale, 2001). However, the effectiveness of parental monitoring may be influenced by adolescents' anxiety and depression symptoms (Perle et al., 2013), referred to here as *mental distress*, such that adolescents with mental distress may have a stronger negative association with parental monitoring. Because girls experience more mental distress than boys, the influence of parental monitoring on adolescent risk taking may interactively depend on the extent of adolescents' mental distress and their gender. Using the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), we examined if gender and mental distress had a moderating effect on the relationship between maternal and paternal monitoring and adolescents' risky behaviors.

Participants & Procedure

Participants included 659 families with 15-year-olds enrolled in the SECCYD with father living in the home and providing information at the 15-year assessment. Mothers and fathers were not required to be married.

- 52% female adolescents
- 83% European American, 7% African American, 6% Hispanic, and 4% were of mixed or other ethnicities.
- Income-to-Needs Ratio: 14% of families were considered low-income (< 2), 45% middle-income (2 - 5), and 41% high-income (> 5).

Demographic information was collected from mothers during a home visit when the child was 1 month old. At the 10 different laboratory sites, adolescents reported on their risky behavior taking and their mental distress when they were 15 years old. In the families' home, mothers and fathers completed questionnaire packets assessing their parental monitoring.

Measures

Mothers' and Fathers' Monitoring

Mothers ($\alpha = .77$) and fathers ($\alpha = .84$) reported on their parental monitoring using the Keeping Tabs questionnaire (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), an 11-item measure assessing parents' levels of supervision and monitoring of their adolescent's whereabouts and behaviors. Responses ranged from 1 (*don't know at all*) to 4 (*know everything*) for questions pertaining to knowledge and 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*) for questions pertaining to supervision.

Adolescent Risky Behaviors

Adolescents reported on how many times they engaged in risky behaviors using the Risky Behavior Questionnaire (Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1994). The questionnaire contains 53 items rated on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 1 (*some*), $\alpha = .89$.

Adolescent Mental Distress

Adolescents reported on their anxiety and depression symptoms using the anxiety and depression subscale in the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach, & Rescorla, 2001). The subscale contains 16 items that are rated on a scale from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true or often true*), $\alpha = .85$.

Results

We used a multiple group path model in Mplus v6.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to determine if the effect of mothers' and fathers' monitoring on adolescents' risky behaviors depended on adolescents' mental distress among boys and girls controlling for income-to-needs ratio. The path model fit the data well, $\chi^2(4) = 1.276$, $p = .865$, RMSEA = .001, 90% CI [.001 - .0043], CFI = 1.00.

For boys, more maternal monitoring was associated with fewer risky behaviors (see Figure 1). No significant interactions emerged.

For girls, more maternal monitoring and lower levels of mental distress were each associated with fewer risky behaviors. Two significant interactions emerged between mental distress and mothers' monitoring and fathers' monitoring. Analyses of simple slopes were conducted to interpret these interactions (see Figure 2). More maternal monitoring was related to fewer risky behaviors among girls with *high* mental distress, and more paternal monitoring was related to fewer risky behaviors among girls with *low* mental distress. Only the interaction between mental distress and mothers' monitoring significantly differed between girls and boys, $\chi^2_D(1) = 7.322$, $p < .01$.

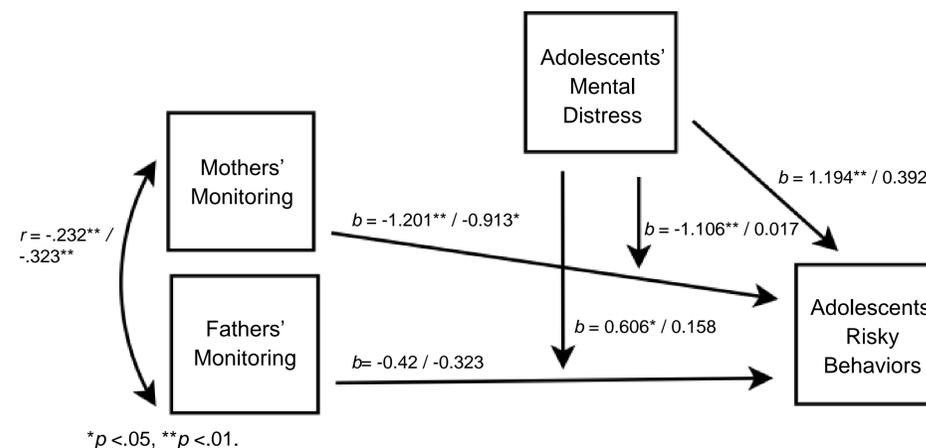


Figure 1. Path model examining the main effects and interactions of mothers' and fathers' monitoring with adolescent mental distress on the number of risky behaviors. The first coefficient corresponds to the adolescent girl model and the second refers to the adolescent boy model. The covariate of family income-to-needs ratio is not pictured.

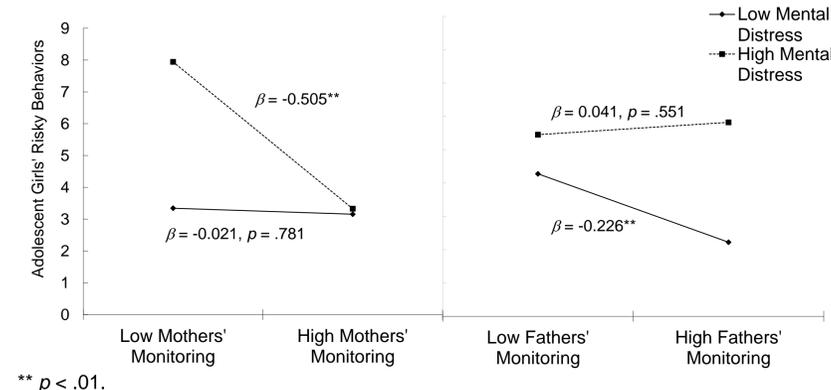


Figure 2. Interaction between parental monitoring and adolescent mental distress predicting the number of risky behaviors taken among adolescent girls. The left side of the figure displays the interaction between mothers' monitoring and mental distress, and the right side displays the interaction between fathers' monitoring and mental distress symptoms.

Conclusions

The current study shows mothers and fathers affect their daughters' risky behavior differently based on her mental distress. Mental distress often includes withdrawal behaviors, such as inhibition, shyness, and avoidance (Rubin, Althoff, Walkup, & Hudziak, 2013). We speculate these withdrawal behaviors may decrease girls' self-disclosure to parents. Additionally, the mother-daughter relationship is one of the closest relationships within the family (Youniss & Smollar, 1986); thus, mothers may be more likely to gain knowledge of their daughters' behavior despite this decreased disclosure. However, fathers tend to rely on others to gain information when they they perceive their daughter as closed off, but are more likely to receive information directly from their daughters when they are perceived as being open (Crouter, Bumpus, Davis, & McHale, 2005). As a result, fathers may not be as responsive to their daughters when they are experiencing mental distress compared to mothers. Our current findings suggest the importance of assessing mental distress, especially in adolescent girls, when analyzing the relationship between parental monitoring and risky behaviors.

Limitations & Future Directions

Our study is limited by concurrent analyses; thus, we are unable to analyze change over time or directionality in these effects. Second, our study relied on mothers' and fathers' reports of their parental monitoring; adolescents' reports of parental monitoring may be a better predictor of adolescents' risky behavior (Cottrell et al., 2003). Lastly, our study only included families with fathers living in the home, excluding single parent homes. Single parents are more likely to work multiple jobs and nonstandard work schedules, which can increase adolescents' engagement in risky behaviors (Han & Waldfogel, 2007).

Self-disclosure from adolescents about where they are and what they are doing is a strong predictor of parents' knowledge of their whereabouts (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). However, mental distress often includes withdrawal behaviors, such as avoidance (Rubin, Althoff, Walkup, & Hudziak, 2013), which may decrease self-disclosure to parents. Future research should further explore the role of adolescent self-disclosure and withdrawal behaviors associated with mental distress.

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