

ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS AND CODEPENDENCE IN DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY CONTEXT

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Abstract. The paper focuses to the aspects which influence the adolescent study style and participation in the education process. The research revealed some gender differences in codependence development for girls and boys, as well as in expression of dysfunctional family influence through the adolescent behavior. The analysis of the data collected from 315 adolescents allowed to state that the well designed education and training programs aimed to the adolescents from dysfunctional families showing codependence can help them to improve education quality.

Key words: adolescent education, behavior, codependence, dysfunctional family.

Introduction

The main task of education system is to prepare the person to be able to compete in the labor market, to be able to keep up with social challenges. At the same time the main social function of education is its ability to preserve and deliver material and mental values to the next generations. The most challenging task for education is the adolescent training because they are substantially influenced by different aspects of life, as they are in the transition period from children to grownup. Behavior problems at this period sometimes are the limiting factor, which does not allow to reach the stated goals and to be successful.

Understanding of adolescent behavior problems specifics allows to clarify the aspects which influence the adolescent, with particular emphasis on the adolescents from dysfunctional families. The latest adolescent behavior research is oriented towards understanding of complex impact of social, psychological and biological aspects. This research deals with the behavioral problems taking into account adolescent attachment to parents, alcohol misuse in the family, and codependence.

Adolescent behavior problem researchers often refer to two separate behavior problem groups: internalized and externalized behavior problems [1]. Internalized problems are characterized by negative emotions kept inside – adolescents feel unhappy, anxious, become withdrawn. These problems are reflected in the passive behavior associated with withdrawal, anxiety, depression and somatic complaints [1]. The main characteristic of externalized problems is that adolescents express their negative emotions outward – they tend to conflict, fight and disagree with others. These problems include a lack of emotional control, as well as aggressive symptoms [1]. There may be instances when adolescent discloses both externalized and internalized behavior problems [2]. Behavior problems can substantially affect academic performance at school, as well as the attitude to education.

Codependence as a psychological concept appeared in the late seventies of the twentieth century in the U.S. Initially, this concept was used to describe a person or persons who were connected with someone who had alcohol dependency [3]. An analysis of the latest research on codependence and review of the interpretations of codependence definitions was done by Dear and colleagues, who concluded that most researchers note four main features of codependence: 1) excessive orientation (focus) on others, 2) self-denial and self-sacrifice, 3) excessive desire to control other people, and 4) concealing, suppression of one's emotions, inability to express emotions [4].

Attachment is a biologically based and long lasting emotional bond that an individual develops to important, close others (most often initially to the mother and/or father). Attachment to parents forms the basic model of relationships which is used for other significant relationships across the life course [5]. Research literature discusses four attachment styles. The first style – a secure attachment, where the child is confident that the attachment figure will be accessible, responsive and helpful, if the child will need help. The child has a sense of security and the desire to explore the world. The other three are insecure attachment styles: ambivalent attachment when it is not clear in which cases parents' help and support are available; dismissive attachment – the child has the belief that he/she will be rejected when seeking help and support; and disorganized attachment – an attachment style characterized by

contradictory or abusive parental behavior [6]. Secure attachment to parents facilitates the basic skills to successfully develop interpersonal relationships and intimate adult relationships later in life [7].

The parents' relationship quality significantly affects the whole family. Numerous studies have shown that family conflicts are risk factors for youth behavior problems. Abuse of alcohol and other addictive substances is often one of the main characteristics of dysfunctional families and a source of distress. Dysfunctional behavior within the family creates insecure attachment patterns and behavior problems [8; 9].

In order to reduce alcohol consumption, most often in Latvia social policies are focused upon the economic aspects – raising the price of alcohol, taking care of life quality raising, etc., but only in recent times has the emphasis been on informative, educational activities and the need for special educational programs [10; 11]. At the same time, there is little research done in Latvia about the impact of alcohol misuse for the other family members. Professionals are well aware of how alcohol abuse affects the family.

The aim of this research was to find out the answer to the question: To what extent do parents' alcohol misuse habits, adolescent attachment relations to the mother and father (trust, communication, alienation) and internalized and externalized behavior problems predict adolescent codependence ratings?

Research object and methods

Participants. Respondents – 315 adolescents from secondary schools from different regional centres, towns and rural areas, as well as from Riga and Riga region (age 15 – 18, $M = 16.67$; $SD = 1.06$) participated in the research. 190 or 60.3 % of participants were girls, and 125 or 39,7 % were boys. T-test did not reveal statistically significant difference between boys ($M = 16.58$, $SD = 1.16$) and girls ($M = 16.65$, $SD = 1.08$) in respect to age $t(344) = 0.64$, $p > 0.05$.

Instruments. Spann-Fischer Codependence Scale, SFCDS, was used for adolescent codependence ratings [12]. Initial adaptation to Latvian language was done by I. Laizāne [13] The use of the original version in codependence studies showed good internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) – from 0.76 [12], up to 0.86. Internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) coefficient in this research is 0.78.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, IPPA, was used for evaluation of adolescent attachment to parents [14]. Instrument adaptation to Latvian language was done by J. Ļubenko [15]. Internal consistency in this research is good: Cronbach alpha for attachment to the father scale is 0.84, (for subscales – mutual trust 0.83; communication 0.79; alienation 0.78); and Cronbach alpha for attachment to the mother is 0.81 (for subscales – mutual trust 0.75; communication 0.69; alienation 0.71). Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test, AUDIT, was used for parents' alcohol use habits evaluation [16]. Initial instrument adaptation to Latvian language was done by I. Laizāne [13]. Internal consistency of the instrument (Cronbach alpha) in this research is 0.84. Youth Self Report, YSR 11/18, was used for adolescent self-reported internalized and externalized problems evaluation [17]. Instrument was adopted for use in Latvia [18]. Similarly as for original instrument version, adopted version showed good internal consistency – Cronbach alpha is 0.91 for internalized problems scale, and 0.88 for externalized problems scale.

Procedure. Part of the research data was collectedly distributing printed questionnaires in secondary schools, where 9th-12th grades students filled them out in their classrooms under supervision of research assistants. Part of the study data was collected using web environment offered by web service provider www.questionpro.com, and setting up web page with the full set of research instruments jauniesuaptauja.questionpro.com. Adolescents were informed about the voluntary nature and confidentiality principles of participation in the research.

Examination of completed questionnaires data showed that 249 web based questionnaires and 66 printed questionnaires were valid for further processing (accordingly 79 % and 21 % of the questionnaires).

Data processing and analysis methods. Data processing was done using software package SPSS, 17th version. Descriptive and analytic statistics tools (t-test, Spearman correlation, Mann-Whitney criterion) were used during data analysis. Linear regression method applicable for data with normal distribution analysis was applied to the data [19].

Results and Discussions

Initially the research regarding the gender difference was applied to the collected data. In order to answer the research question - what are the gender differences in regard to adolescent self-reported internalized and externalized behavior problems, adolescent codependence, attachment relations to the mother and father, and parents' alcohol misuse habits – Mann-Whitney U-criterion was applied. Results show statistically significant gender differences in externalized behavior ($U = 9491.5$, $p < 0.05$) – boys have higher scores than girls (the research results are examined separately by gender, and female adolescents are denoted by the word “girls”, and male adolescents – by the word “boys”). Significant gender difference is also found for adolescents report of parents' alcohol misuse habits ($U = 8990.0$, $p < 0.01$) – girls report higher parents' alcohol misuse intensity than boys. Statistically significant gender difference was found also in codependence ratings with girls having higher scores than boys ($U = 9982.0$, $p < 0.01$).

The set of regression analysis was applied to the collected data in order to look for the answer to the research question – To what extent do parents' alcohol misuse habits, adolescent attachment relations to the mother and father (trust, communication, alienation) and internalized and externalized behavior problems predict adolescent codependence ratings?

Twelve independent variables: parents' alcohol misuse habits, attachment to the mother and father (trust, communication and alienation), internalized behavior (anxiety, depression, somatic complaints) and externalized behavior (aggressive behavior, rule breaking) were used in regression (stepwise) analysis. Regression analysis revealed that three variables: withdrawal, anxiety, and alienation from the mother, are significant predictors of girls codependence ratings. The regression model including these variables can explain 49 % of codependence ratings variance for girls (Fig. 1). This allows to state that the girls with withdrawal, anxiety, and alienation from the mother most probably will have higher codependence ratings.

By turn, two variables: withdrawal, and alienation from the mother, are significant predictors of boys codependence ratings. The regression model including these variables can explain 33 % of codependence ratings variance for boys (Fig. 1). This allows to state that the boys with withdrawal, and alienation from the mother most probably will have higher codependence ratings.

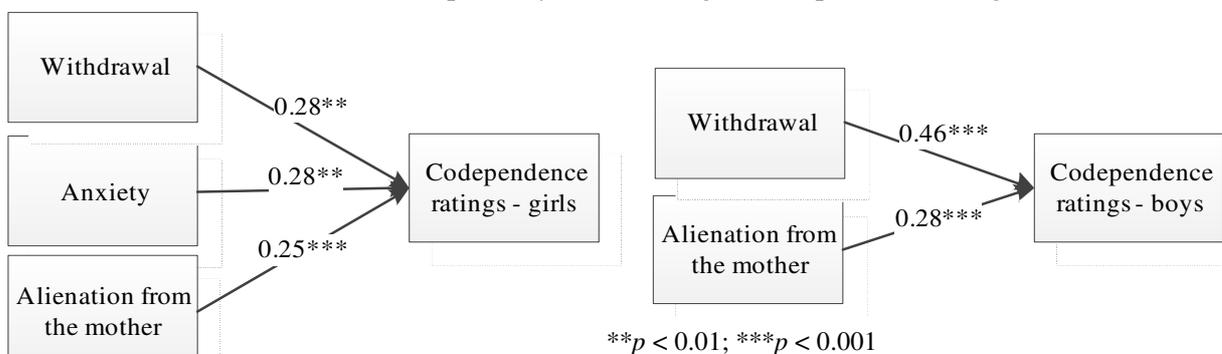


Fig. 1. **Model for predicting girls' and boys' codependence ratings based on regression (stepwise) analysis with attachment to parents, behavior problems and parent alcohol use habits as independent variables, standardized regression model β coefficients presented**

In this study, boys show more externalized behavior problems than girls, partly confirming the findings of other studies. A large number of previous studies indicate gender differences, girls showing more internalized behavior problems, and boys showing more externalized behavior problems [20; 21]. In this study, the differences appear in relation to externalized, but not to internalized behavior problems. Hypothetically it could be because of the changing public stereotypes about how boys and girls should be expressing their emotions, and thus they may have more similar internalized behaviors.

Results of this study on gender differences in codependence ratings coincide with other studies which found that girls display higher codependence ratings than boys. There are a number of studies, which emphasize that women and girls show higher codependence behavior levels [22; 23].

There is a statistically significant gender difference in adolescent-reported parents' alcohol use habits ratings – girls reported higher parents' alcohol use habits ratings than boys. Most likely, this can be explained either by the girls' greater openness in completing anonymous questionnaires when asked about family difficulties, or that girls are likely to pay more attention to parents' behavior than boys, or that girls are more critical of parents' alcohol use habits.

This study confirms the theoretical model of the importance of the secure or insecure attachment to parents. Girls who have become alienated from the mother and father show more internalized behavior problems. This indicates that the perceived quality of attachment relationships is important in connection with the girl's well-being. If there is an alienation from the mother and father, it is likely that the girl will have a greater tendency to keep feelings inside, and more likely to experience sadness, depression, and anxiety. Father's role in girls' internalized behavior problems explanation is relatively smaller, but still significant. Similar results have been obtained in other studies [21]. This study confirms also the statements made by other researchers [24] that the girls who are alienated from mothers, and have lost trust to the mother and father, most probably will have behavior problems in adolescence.

Adolescent – reported parents' alcohol use habits in association with behavior problems of this study confirms findings of previous studies [25], that these habits influence adolescent internalized and externalized behavior problems.

The study results show that significant codependence rating predictors for girls are internalized behavior withdrawal/depression and anxiety/depression ratings, and alienation from mother, while significant codependence rating predictors for boys are internalized behavior withdrawal/depression ratings, and insecure attachment dimension - alienation from mother. This could be explained in that both girls and boys from families with offensive behavior of parents who are withdrawn, with communication difficulties will then exhibit more codependence behaviors in their roles in dysfunctional family.

Conclusions

1. Regression models developed during the research allow to state that insecure attachment, withdrawal and alienation from mother and internalized behavior problems can predict codependence for girls, and insecure attachment and alienation from mother and internalized behavior problems can predict codependence for boys. This gender difference should be taken into account by the educators working with adolescents from dysfunctional families.
2. This research reveals important aspects of the associations between adolescent's self-assessment of attachment relationships with parents, parents' alcohol drinking habits, adolescent codependence ratings, and adolescent internalized and externalized behavior problems. If these aspects are taken in account, the education quality of adolescents from dysfunctional families can be improved substantially.
3. The practical application of the research concerns the empirical evidence for the state and local government officials, as well as to education professionals, that it is necessary to develop adolescent problem behavior management programs which provide strong parental involvement and support. These programs should be available for adolescents with codependence behaviors, with other behavior problems and behavioral disorders, and for their parents with alcohol misuse problems in the family.

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