Parents’ reactions to adolescents’ problematic behaviors

av

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Abstract


Traditional socialization theories suggest that parents shape their children, and that parents’ socialization strategies are largely independent of their children’s behaviors. These ideas, however, have received criticism. In this dissertation, I focus on how children and adolescents influence their parents’ behaviors. Specifically, I examine parents’ reactions to problematic behaviors in their adolescents. In the three studies, I presented theoretical models that offered explanations why parents react as they do to problematic behaviors in their adolescents. In these models, parents’ cognitions worked as mechanisms to explain their subsequent reactions. The overall pattern in the studies was that parents tended to shift in cognitions about their own role as parents and their adolescents’ behaviors when they were faced with problematic behaviors, which influenced their behaviors toward their adolescents. In Study I, parents became less opposed to adolescent drinking when they encountered their adolescents intoxicated. This reaction was explained by a reduction in dissonance between their attitudes to adolescent drinking and their knowledge of their own adolescents’ drinking. In Study II, parents of adolescents with hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention problems (HIA) reported that their adolescents did not respond to their attempts to correct their behaviors. This perception made them feel powerless and, as a consequence, they increased in negative behaviors and decreased in positive parenting strategies. These perceptions might indicate that parents partly have given up the idea that they could change their adolescents’ misbehaviors. In addition, as shown in Study III, these perceptions were influenced by parents’ earlier experiences with their older children. In sum, the results of this dissertation suggest that adolescents influence their parents’ cognitions and behaviors. Further, the results highlight the importance of focusing on how parents’ ways of thinking influence their parenting strategies.

Keywords: adolescents, problematic behaviors, adolescents’ characteristics, parents’ cognitions, parents’ reactions, parenting, parent-child relationship, family system.

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