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Study Guide

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Families and Crime

by Rolf Loeber, University of Pittsburgh

Which Family Factors Are Related to Crime?

Criminality runs in families. For many years, researchers have been trying to learn why that is so. Researchers have investigated how families with delinquent children differ from families in which children are not delinquent. They have found that parents of delinquent children often lack involvement with their children, provide poor supervision, and administer inadequate or erratic discipline. Some parents of delinquent youngsters are themselves not law-abiding, thus providing examples of deviant behavior and values that their offspring may imitate.

Many delinquent youngsters grow up in families that experience adversities, such as marital conflict, divorce, parental illness, poverty, or low socioeconomic status. Few families face all these difficulties, but many confront one or more. It may be that different combinations of familial factors contribute to delinquency in offspring.

Being raised in poverty or being the child of criminal parents does not necessarily cause one to become a criminal.

Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence that children raised in adversity are disproportionately likely to become delinquent. Although many individuals raised in adverse family circumstances are not criminals, overall, the chances for such children to become delinquent are greater than for children reared in happier settings.

Various indicators of family disruption or inadequacy are correlated with delinquent behavior. These same factors can also be used to predict the likelihood that a child will become delinquent.

Different explanations have been offered to account for the association between patterns of family life and patterns of delinquent behavior. Some analysts say the association results from social or economic conditions that influence the behavior of both children and parents. Other analysts blame poor parenting skills. Still others look to biological explanations. Research on the criminality of twins and adopted children, for example, suggests that genetic factors may predispose some children to become delinquents. Genetic factors, however, can be but part of the explanation. It is likely that all these explanations are relevant in particular cases and in varying combinations in different cases.

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Some parents have a hard time showing affection toward their children, creating a harmonious or supportive family atmosphere, and providing consistent, effective discipline. In short, some parents don't know how to be effective parents. New programs are experimenting with ways to help people learn to be better parents.

What Causes What in Families?

Explanations of delinquency that focus on the parents and their behavior as parents may appear one-sided. A complete explanation of delinquency no doubt must also incorporate biological, social, environmental, and other factors. Children inherit a proportion of their constitutional characteristics, such as intelligence, aggressive tendencies, and hyperactivity. Their social environment, first at home, and later at school, molds these characteristics over time. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence that parents' approaches to raising and disciplining their children have a significant independent effect on the children's behavior.

Not all home environments are equally suited to dealing effectively with youngsters who exhibit problem behavior early in life. Parents differ greatly in their childrearing

skills. Some parents are too harsh, irritable, and inconsistent. Others are too lenient, neglectful, or preoccupied with their own concerns. A number of studies have found that parents' childrearing practices, good or bad, are relatively stable and that early conduct problems, and later ones, are related to how youngsters are reared.

Increasingly, investigators, clinicians, and childrearing experts are focusing their attention on early rather than later child problem behavior. A primary reason is that most children learn deviant and approved behavior in the family home long before they are exposed to deviant peers. If the conditions that predispose some children to become delinquents can be ameliorated or prevented, there is hope that later conduct problems can be reduced. Another reason for concentrating on early childhood is that the learning of deviant behavior is importantly shaped by the quality and quantity of parent-child interactions. Many forms of delinquency and serious misbehavior are more common among children raised in broken homes, or in conditions of poverty and material deprivation, than in families that do not suffer from these disadvantages. Nonetheless, for any specific category of family, the behavior problems are more pronounced in families characterized by poor parenting skills.

Accumulating evidence points to a relatively high degree of continuity between early conduct problems in youngsters and later delinquency. For example, early lying, disobedience, aggression, truancy, and drug use are known to be good predictors of various degrees of delinquency many years later. The evidence for this conclusion is based mainly on the experience of white males; most delinquency research that has focused on early childhood has not concentrated on white females or on minority children. There is, however, little reason to believe that these findings would not apply to white females and minority children. Many kinds of problem behavior appear to be more easily modifiable when the child is young and more difficult to change when the behavior has become entrenched over time.

Important changes can take place in the quality of interactions between family members when a child's misbehavior or delinquency increases over time. Many parents become very angry and short-tempered with a persistently troublesome child, or become disillusioned when they recognize that they cannot trust what the youngster tells them. Over time, parent-child conflicts may escalate, or both parties may become more distant and uninvolved.

One feature of youngsters' antisocial development is that they often direct antisocial behavior—particularly aggression and lying—against their parents. As a consequence, parents become less able to exercise their parental authority and may, in effect, especially with older children, abdicate their parental responsibilities.

Clinicians and researchers have long argued that parents' inadequate childrearing practices can be improved, regardless of whether the skills were inadequate to begin with or were undermined by youngsters' antisocial behavior.

The basic idea is that improvements in childrearing practices can lead to improvements in the youngsters' problem behavior.

What Is the Evidence for Parent Training?

Systematic evaluation of parent training began only a few decades ago. Since then a number of studies have shown that well-planned training sessions can help parents improve their childrearing practices, which in turn can achieve improvements in children's behavior. Although parent training programs vary, most include the following features:

- Parents are taught to identify their children's problem behavior.
- Parents are taught to apply more appropriate consequences to misbehavior. They are encouraged to use less "nagging" and to increase the use of nonphysical punishment such as loss of privileges. At the same time, constructive behavior is rewarded.
- Parents are taught to negotiate the resolution of problems, especially with their older children.
- Parents are taught to supervise their children more closely and to monitor their comings and goings, their activities, and their choice of friends.

So far, these programs have been especially successful in dealing with aggression in children. Careful observations in family homes before, during, and after parent training have shown that the frequency of children's aggression was significantly reduced in the majority of the studies. This was confirmed by parental reports.

Most of the training programs that work with the natural parents have focused on preadolescent rather than on adolescent youngsters. It is likely that parent training is more effective when children are young; by middle adolescence behavior may be so entrenched or so subject to peer influences that changes can be made only with extraordinary efforts.

Another line of parent training has focused on foster parents who, for a period of time, work with problem youngsters whose own parents are unable to carry out their parental duties. These programs are often called "specialized child care," because the host parents are specifically trained for this task. Many of the principles listed above are used in their training; in addition, the parents are educated to develop positive relationships with the youngsters and, through the use of individualized written contracts between foster parent and child, to teach the children to become responsible individuals.

Parents in training programs are often assisted in their difficult tasks by a support network of other parents and supervisory staff. Both efforts—the training of natural parents and of specialized foster parents—appear to be more viable and humane approaches for dealing with problem children than institutionalization, which may be the only other option for some children.

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What Are the Advantages and Limitations of Parent Training?

Although training of natural parents has been among the most promising approaches for dealing with the conduct of problem youngsters, a number of issues remain. For instance, we do not know enough about the effect of parent training on youngsters' concealment of their antisocial acts. And few studies have demonstrated that parent training prevents or reduces existing delinquency or drug use.

Although parent training programs show promise as an approach for dealing with conduct problems, especially in very young children, important issues must be resolved before we can say that parent training can play a major role in preventing delinquency. For example, existing programs are quite expensive. Many parents do not have insurance, cannot afford the cost of participating in these programs, and cannot afford to pay for their children's participation. It may not be realistic to expect that parent training can reach a significant fraction of parents of problem children. Moreover, it is not clear how long the beneficial effects of training last.

We need to learn much more about the effectiveness of parent training for minority families. Most of the training programs have been undertaken with white families; culturally appropriate programs for minorities have not yet been developed. Finally, a proportion of parents are not immediately willing to participate. Some of them may join a training program if barriers such as access to day care or babysitting are overcome. Others may need to be sensitized through publicity campaigns on the benefits of parental training.

Another group of parents, however, are either unavailable or not quite capable of going through a parent training program. This heightens the importance of alternative procedures, such as a home visitor program for in-home training or specialized foster care. Although there have as yet been few evaluations of the effects of such foster care on children's behavior, the initial results are promising.

Turning to purely preventive approaches, it is quite possible that parents can be trained in skills that will help them curtail incipient problem behavior in their young children before the problems become difficult to manage. Unfortunately, such preventive approaches have not yet been investigated. The Perry Preschool Program (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, and Weikart 1984), however, a program which was highly successful in preventing delinquency, contained a component that concentrated on parents in addition to the intensive preschool program.

What Is the Role of Government?

The role of government in parenting training and in the socialization of children is necessarily limited. Government cannot be expected to assume responsibility for raising children and teaching them to abstain from antisocial behavior or to adopt socially approved behavior. This is a task that requires patience and care over many years, a process which is unique to parents' bond with their children and is unlikely ever to be replicated in institutions outside the family.

Some commentators on the role of the family in American society have been apprehensive that some governmental

interventions into family life may do more harm than good. They say, for instance, that some social service and social welfare programs may contribute to the breakup of families that otherwise would have remained together. It is possible, however, to conceive of governmental interventions that could help families function better and make childrearing more of a success.

Current governmental efforts have been aimed largely at improving the environment in which children grow up by bettering schools, housing, and nourishment. Major gains have been made in these respects (although not for all strata of the population); however, we have no way of determining if these interventions have kept some children from becoming delinquent or kept some families from breaking up.

Governmental efforts could more directly attempt to improve family functioning. For example, efforts could be made to help community organizations develop parent support groups, advice hotlines for parents, group training in parenting skills, and other low-cost programs directed to family stability. Parents-to-be, and particularly parents of high-risk groups of children, could be offered parent training programs. This would be particularly relevant for single parents or for parents of toddlers who show signs of hyperactive or other disruptive behavior. Pediatricians, general practitioners, and other service providers could be better trained to "flag" problem behaviors that warrant intervention and to counsel parents on how to obtain help.

More intensive programs could then be limited to families who need more intensive forms of intervention because their children exhibit unique or highly resistant problem behavior. Specialized professionals might give individualized training to the natural parents, or the children could be placed in specialized foster care families.

All these improvements could be accomplished on a voluntary basis, without affecting family autonomy. A portion of existing funds now used to deal with antisocial or delinquent youngsters in the courts, schools, and communities could be channeled toward the development of such preventive interventions.

In sum, both government and community organizations can help families to function better and to rear children in ways that lessen the chances that they will drift into serious forms of delinquency.

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Discussion Questions

1. What rationales justify use of parent training as a tool to reduce delinquency?
2. Which forms of family malfunctioning are most susceptible to improvement as a result of parent training?
3. How can parents be helped to prevent delinquency in their offspring?

4. How can the government best support the viability of families and aid parents in dealing with children whose characteristics place them at high risk of becoming delinquents?

5. Should the government provide funds to support parent training and other programs aimed at improving family functioning?

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