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## **Adoptive Parent Hostility and Children's Peer Behavior Problems: Examining the Role of Genetically Informed Child Attributes on Adoptive Parent Behavior**

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# Adoptive Parent Hostility and Children's Peer Behavior Problems: Examining the Role of Genetically Informed Child Attributes on Adoptive Parent Behavior

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Socially disruptive behavior during peer interactions in early childhood is detrimental to children's social, emotional, and academic development. Few studies have investigated the developmental underpinnings of children's socially disruptive behavior using genetically sensitive research designs that allow examination of parent-on-child and child-on-parent (evocative genotype-environment correlation [*r*GE]) effects when examining family process and child outcome associations. Using an adoption-at-birth design, the present study controlled for passive genotype-environment correlation and directly examined evocative *r*GE while examining the associations between family processes and children's peer behavior. Specifically, the present study examined the evocative effect of genetic influences underlying toddler low social motivation on mother-child and father-child hostility and the subsequent influence of parent hostility on disruptive peer behavior during the preschool period. Participants were 316 linked triads of birth mothers, adoptive parents, and adopted children. Path analysis showed that birth mother low behavioral motivation predicted toddler low social motivation, which predicted both adoptive mother-child and father-child hostility, suggesting the presence of an evocative genotype-environment association. In addition, both mother-child and father-child hostility predicted children's later disruptive peer behavior. Results highlight the importance of considering genetically influenced child attributes on parental hostility that in turn links to later child social behavior. Implications for intervention programs focusing on early family processes and the precursors of disrupted child social development are discussed.

*Keywords:* genotype-environment correlation, hostile parenting, toddler low social motivation, child peer behavior

Disruptive peer behavior is characterized by aggressive, defiant, or antisocial behavior that interferes with peer interactions (McWayne, Sekino, Hampton, & Fantuzzo, 2002). In early childhood

(3- to 5-year-olds), this disruptive behavior occurs primarily in the classroom and during peer play and can negatively impact concurrent and future social, emotional, and academic outcomes

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(Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Crick et al., 2006; Hampton & Fantuzzo, 2003). Disruptive peer behavior during early childhood can inhibit the development of social competencies necessary for establishing later relationships with peers (Crick et al., 2006), and has been linked to deficits in early learning and motivation (Coolahan et al., 2000; Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002), as well as antisocial and criminal behavior in early adulthood (Vitaro, Barker, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2012).

Parenting practices have a significant and well-established impact on early childhood socialization processes, including children's peer behavior (Belsky, 1984; Ladd, 1999). Positive aspects of parenting such as warmth and supportiveness predict both concurrent and later social competence in children between 3 and 5 years of age (Eiden, Colder, Edwards, & Leonard, 2009; Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). Conversely, negative or hostile parenting can have a detrimental effect on children's social competence and social interaction skills (Brannigan, Gemmell, Pevalin, & Wade, 2002; Carson & Parke, 1996). Consistent with social learning theory (Putallaz & Heflin, 1990), when poor social skills are learned through negative parent-child interactions, they may shape children's social behavior, negatively affecting their reactions in social situations (Russell, Pettit, & Mize, 1998). Additionally, mounting evidence has suggested that mothers' versus fathers' negative parenting may have differential influences on child social outcomes, with overt hostility in fathers contributing to disruptive peer behavior (Carson & Parke, 1996; Casas et al., 2006; Mitchell & Cabrera, 2009; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1999), and a lack of warmth and support in mothers contributing to less prosocial child behavior (Cabrera, Fagan, Wight, & Schadler, 2011; Dumas, LaFreniere, & Serketich, 1995; Lengua et al., 2007).

Aspects of toddler temperament such as low social motivation have also been associated with concurrent and later disruptive peer behavior (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005; Zeller, Vannatta, Schafer, & Noll, 2003). Low social motivation is characterized by a preference for solitary play and inattention to social interactions (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). Additionally, genetic influences have been found for low social motivation (Silberg et al., 2005) and inattention in social situations (e.g., Saudino, 2005; Sherman, Iacono, & McGue, 1997), indicating possible parent-to-child transmission. Thus, there is evidence that low social motivation is linked to the development of disruptive peer behavior and that this linkage may be due, in part, to genetic influences inherited from one's biological parents.

In biologically related families, associations between parent and child characteristics may be the result of shared environmental influences and/or shared genetic influences. These shared genetic influences may also affect the child's rearing environment. When there is an association between a person's genotype and environment, this is referred to as genotype-environment correlation ( $rGE$ ). Because the majority of studies examining the role of parenting on the development of peer behavior have typically focused on biologically related families, it is impossible to unambiguously disentangle whether such parent-child associations are due to genetic or environmental influences.

The present study addresses this gap by examining disruptive peer behavior using a sample of children adopted at birth and their adoptive parents *and* birth mothers. A cascading set of influences

is examined, beginning with (1) the influence of birth mother low behavioral motivation on toddler low social motivation, (2) associations between toddler low social motivation and adoptive mother-child and father-child hostility, and (3) associations between adoptive parenting hostility and subsequent disruptive peer behavior.

### Temperamental Factors Associated With Disruptive Peer Behavior

Many child characteristics have been observed as developmental correlates of disruptive peer behavior, including the temperamental traits of social inattention and low motivation to engage in social situations (Bulotsky-Shearer, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2010; Fantuzzo, Sekino, & Cohen, 2004; Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002; Olson, Bates, Sandy, & Lanthier, 2000). A growing body of research has examined behavior that is characteristic of low social motivation, such as solitary play and socially inattentive behavior in childhood (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan et al., 2004; Coplan & Weeks, 2010; Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Low social motivation-based behavior has been identified as conceptually distinct from shyness (Coplan et al., 2004) and social avoidance (Coplan & Weeks, 2010). Theoretically, this behavioral profile is thought to be underpinned by low social approach motivation, where children lack intrinsic motivation to engage in social activities (Coplan et al., 2004). Additionally, research has shown that there is a significant genetic component to low social motivation in early childhood (Silberg et al., 2005).

A related construct in adults is the biologically based behavioral approach system (BAS), which is proposed to account for individual differences in behavioral motivation in adults (Carver & White, 1994; Corr, 2004; Gray & McNaughton, 2000). The BAS is related to incentive and approach behavior such as reward seeking, impulsivity, and extraversion (Gray & McNaughton, 2000) and has shown to have a significant genetic influence (Takahashi et al., 2007). Individuals with high levels of BAS exhibit greater extraversion and sensitivity to reward, whereas those with low levels of BAS experience low motivation to engage in rewarding situations. BAS scores have been found to be associated with behavioral motivation (Jackson & Smillie, 2004). Low BAS scores have been related to low motivation, and clinically low levels of BAS have been associated with a severe lack of motivation and with depression (Takahashi, Ozaki, Roberts, & Ando, 2012). Additionally, low BAS scores are associated with low motivation to engage in social interactions (Kimbrel, Mitchell, & Nelson-Gray, 2010) and with inattentive social behavior (Hundt, Kimbrel, Mitchell, & Nelson-Gray, 2008; Kimbrel et al., 2010).

Collectively this research indicates that low behavioral approach in adults and children is indicative of low behavioral and social motivation. Given evidence of genetic influences and common theoretical underpinnings for both low behavioral motivation in adults and low social motivation in children, a common genetic influence may be indicated in biologically related parents and children. Whereas parents may affect child behavior through shared genetic influences, children's social behavior may also be a product of the family environment via parenting and parental responses to child behavior (Patterson, 1982).

## The Influence of Hostile Parenting on Social Behavior

Parenting during early childhood has been shown to have a significant impact on social development such as social competence (Lengua et al., 2007) and cooperation and social engagement (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008). Parenting that is harsh, negative, or hostile is particularly detrimental for children's social outcomes; hostility and unsupportiveness in the parent-child relationship are associated with less social competence and more social aggression in early to middle childhood (Brannigan et al., 2002; Carson & Parke, 1996; Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003). This is consistent with social learning theory, where children exposed to hostile parent-child exchanges learn maladaptive social responses (Russell et al., 1998). Consequently, children may interpret and respond disruptively in peer contexts based on prior negative experiences with parents.

Previous research on hostile parenting has primarily focused on the mother-child relationship in studying parent-to-child influences. Recent evidence has indicated that the father-child relationship also has specific influences on children's emotional and behavioral development, specifically in relation to hostility in the parent-child relationship (Harold, Elam, Lewis, Rice, & Thapar, 2012; Lamb, 2004; Stover et al., 2012). For example, harsh and controlling paternal behavior was found to negatively predict child social competence (Mitchell & Cabrera, 2009) and social restraint in the classroom (Feldman & Wentzel, 1990). Fathers' harsh, negative, and controlling authoritarian parenting has also been associated with poor social development (Kelley, Smith, Green, Berndt, & Rogers, 1998) and child relational aggression (Carson & Parke, 1996; Casas et al., 2006), leading to subsequent future peer rejection (Crick et al., 2006). Whereas some research has evidenced a link between mother's controlling behavior and social aggression (Casas et al., 2006), less warmth, sensitivity, and supportive behavior have typically been found to negatively affect child social competence and prosocial behavior (Cabrera et al., 2011; Dumas et al., 1995; Lengua et al., 2007). Thus, although both mother-child and father-child hostility adversely affect social development in early childhood, fathers' hostile parenting, in particular, may make stronger contributions to children's disruptive social behavior.

## The Confound of Genotype-Environment Correlation

Low behavioral motivation, low social motivation, and inattention have been shown to be moderately heritable in both adults and children (Goldsmith, Buss, & Lemery, 1997; Saviouk et al., 2011; Sherman et al., 1997; Silberg et al., 2005; Takahashi et al., 2007), indicating possible parent-to-child transmission of these characteristics in biologically related parents and children. Such parent characteristics (i.e., low behavioral motivation) may therefore influence child characteristics (i.e., low social motivation) through shared genetic influences. Additionally, associations between hostile parenting and children's social behavior may be due to shared genetic influences. It is not possible to unambiguously disentangle whether parent-to-child influences are a result of shared genetic effects (i.e., genotype), postnatal environmental influences (i.e., parenting), or both, in studies of biologically related families, because these effects are confounded (see Harold et al., 2011). As biologically related parents and children share genes, associations

between parent and child traits may also result from this overlap. It is also possible that children's genotype may be related to their rearing environment, as studies have found evidence of genetic influences on parenting behaviors (see Horwitz & Neiderhiser, 2011, for a review). When children's genotype is systematically related to their environment, this is known as genotype-environment correlation (*r*GE; Plomin, DeFries, Knopik, & Neiderhiser, 2013; Plomin, DeFries, & Loehlin, 1977). Two primary types of *r*GE are described in the literature. First, passive *r*GE is present when children's genes are correlated with their environment. For example, passive *r*GE occurs when parenting behavior is correlated with the parents' genes that children inherit (e.g., temperamentally dysregulated parents may parent more harshly than parents with other temperament profiles). Second, evocative *r*GE occurs when children's genetically influenced characteristics evoke a systematic response from the environment (e.g., child behavior may evoke more hostile parenting).

Passive and evocative *r*GE have been highlighted in past research using the twin design (Horwitz & Neiderhiser, 2011) and a variation thereof known as the children-of-twins design (D'Onofrio, 2005). Some studies have suggested that passive *r*GE is not an evident component underlying associations between features of the rearing environment (e.g., parenting behavior) and children's developmental outcomes (Caspi et al., 2004). However, evidence of passive *r*GE cannot be ruled out in most genetically informed studies, specifically in relation to links between parenting behavior and child adjustment. Examination of evocative *r*GE has been facilitated by longitudinal designs where genetically influenced twin behaviors predict later parenting. Using this design, evocative effects have been found between toddlers' difficult temperament and behavior on mothers' hostile parenting (Forget-Dubois et al., 2007).

A handful of genetically informed studies have examined measures of peer relationships. Peer difficulties at ages 5 to 7 were found to be influenced by genetic and nonshared environmental influences (Boivin et al., 2013). This pattern of influences has also been found for peer delinquency (Beaver et al., 2008; Bullock, Deater-Deckard, & Leve, 2006; Iervolino et al., 2002) and peer interaction (Pike & Atzaba-Poria, 2003) during late childhood and adolescence. The few studies examining peer behavior in early childhood have evidenced genetic influences on prosocial behavior (Knafo & Plomin, 2006) and social competence (Roisman & Fraley, 2012). In general, there is less evidence of shared environmental influences on peer relationships than for parent-child relationships, although both show genetic and nonshared environmental influences.

Given the presence of both genetic and environmental contributions to parenting and peer interactions, as well as to child behavior, the associations among child behavior and parenting, and parenting and peer behavior, may be due to genetic factors, environmental factors, or a combination of the two (including *r*GE). Utilizing research designs that permit separation of passive *r*GE from family relationship and child outcome associations and that permit examination of evocative *r*GE has significant implications for understanding associations between patterns of family interaction and child development. We offer a study design that accommodates this unique opportunity.

## The Present Study

The present study examined the influence of birth mother low behavioral motivation on toddler low social motivation and the potential evocative influence this child behavior may have on adoptive mother-child hostility and father-child hostility toward their toddler. Additionally, the present study examined the influence of adoptive mother-child and father-child hostility as predictors of disruptive peer behavior during early childhood, as reported by adoptive mothers and fathers. In order to address the potential confounding role of shared method variance as a result of reliance on mother- and father-reported parenting practices and children's disruptive peer behavior, additional analyses were conducted. Specifically, separate mother-child and father-child models were estimated to remediate the potential confounding role of shared method variance and to affirm the pattern of results reported. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the interplay between specific parent-based family interaction patterns and child disruptive peer behavior, allowing the confound of passive *rGE* to be controlled while also permitting simultaneous examination of child-on-parent effects stemming from child genetically influenced risk behaviors (evocative *rGE*) on both mother-child and father-child relationships.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

**Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS).** Participants were a subsample ( $n = 316$ ) of 361 linked sets of adopted children, adoptive mothers and fathers, and birth mothers. Participants were recruited between 2003 and 2006 through 33 adoption agencies located in 10 states spanning the northwest, mid-Atlantic, and southwest regions of the United States. Each adoption agency appointed a liaison from its organization to assist with recruitment—a person who identified participants who completed an adoption plan that met the study's eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria included (1) domestic adoption placement, (2) placement occurring within 3 months postpartum, (3) nonrelative placement, (4) no known major medical conditions such as extreme prematurity or extensive medical surgeries, and (5) birth and adoptive parents able to understand English at the eighth-grade level. Study participants were representative of the adoptive and birth parent populations that completed adoption plans at the participating agencies during the same time period (Leve et al., 2013). Data were collected by home visit assessments and online questionnaires. For the present study, data from the adoptive parent assessment when the child was 27 months ( $M = 2.30$  years,  $SD = 0.13$ ) and 4.5 years ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 0.16$ ) of age were used and data from the birth parent assessment at 4.5 years. Fifty-six percent of the children were male. The median child age at adoption placement was 2 days. Birth parents typically had high school or trade school education levels and household incomes under \$25,000. Adoptive parents were typically college-educated middle- to upper-class families. Given the nature of our hypotheses, single parents ( $n = 13$ ) and same-sex couples ( $n = 21$ ) were excluded from the present report. Adoptive mother, adoptive father, and birth mother mean age in years was 37 ( $SD = 5.5$ ), 38 ( $SD = 5.8$ ), and 24 ( $SD = 5.9$ ), respectively, at the child's birth. The ethnicity

of adoptive mothers, fathers, and adopted child, respectively, was 91%, 90%, and 71% Caucasian; 4%, 5%, and 11% African American; 3%, 2%, and 7% Hispanic or Latino; 1%, 1%, and 5% multiracial; 1%, 1%, 2% Asian; <1%, 0%, and 3% American Indian or Alaskan Native; and 1%, 1%, and 1% unknown or unreported. There were no significant differences between the full EGDS sample and the analytical sample used in this report. For full demographic information refer to Leve et al. (2013).

## Measures

**Birth mother low behavioral motivation.** Birth mothers completed the Behavioral Inhibition/Behavioral Activation Scales (Carver & White, 1994) at the age 4.5 years assessment. Birth mothers responded to statements assessing their behavioral inhibition and behavioral activation on a 4-point scale ranging from *very true* to *very false*, with high scores indicating less inhibition and activation. The five-item reward responsiveness scale assessed birth mother's reaction to positive outcomes, the four-item drive scale assessed birth mother's motivation relevant to goals, and the four-item fun-seeking scale assessed birth mother's likelihood to engage in new activities and spontaneous behavior. The reward responsiveness scale included items such as "When good things happen to me it affects me strongly," "When I'm doing well at something I love to keep at it," and "It would excite me to win a contest"; the drive scale included items such as "When I want something I usually go all-out to get it," "When I see a chance to get something I want I move on it right away," and "I go out of my way to get things I want"; and the fun-seeking scale included items such as "I crave excitement and new sensations," "I often act on the spur of the moment," and "I am willing to try something new if I think it will be fun." Internal consistency estimates were good (reward  $\alpha = .77$ , drive  $\alpha = .80$ , fun seeking  $\alpha = .68$ ). The scales were all moderately correlated ( $r = .49$  to  $.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and were combined into a single measure of low behavioral motivation (Corr, 2004; Gray & McNaughton, 2000), with higher scores indicating lower behavioral motivation ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Toddler low social motivation.** When the children were 27 months of age, adoptive mothers and fathers each completed five items from the Maternal Perception Questionnaire (Olson, Bates, & Bayles, 1982), comprising the unresponsiveness to parent subscale. Adoptive parents responded to statements assessing how unresponsive they perceived their child to be on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating greater disengagement and low social motivation toward parents. Items from the scale included "My child prefers playing by him/herself rather than with me," "My child doesn't come to me as often as I would like," and "I often find it hard to get my child's attention."

Also when children were 27 months of age, adoptive mothers and fathers individually participated in a 3-min free play task with their child in the families' home. The free play session was later rated by independent coders for a number of qualities of parent and child interaction. Three of the items were selected to reflect toddler low social motivation. They included "How often did the child become involved in his/her own play without reference to the parent's play?" "How often did the child and parent engage in parallel play?" and "How often did the child engage in solitary pretend play?" which were rated by coders on a 5-point scale

ranging from *never* to *almost all the time* (Pears & Ayers, 2000). Items were scored for low levels of child engagement and low levels of responsiveness to the parent. Reliabilities were calculated on 15% of the sample using weighted percentage agreement by assigning weights to the reliability coder and calibrator answers. Each differing set of answers was assigned a percentage of how far they varied from absolute agreement, with the weights assigned determined by the range of the scale. An average was then taken of the weights to arrive at a weighted percentage agreement, with values for the three items ranging from .80 to .94. The five parent-rated questionnaire items and the three coder-rated items from the free play task were standardized and combined to form composite measures of child low social motivation relative to both mother and father. The resulting mother and father measures were found to have adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .63$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ , respectively) and to be moderately correlated ( $r = .36$ ) and were combined into a single measure of child low social motivation.

**Adoptive parent-child hostility.** Adoptive mothers and fathers completed the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (Melby et al., 1993) about their parenting behaviors at child age 27 months. Parents reported on their own hostile behaviors toward their child on a 7-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*, with high scores indicating greater hostility. The five-item hostility subscale included items such as "How often did you get angry at him/her?" "How often did you criticize him/her?" and "How often did you argue with him/her when you disagreed about something?" Internal consistency estimates were good for mothers and fathers ( $\alpha = .72$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ , respectively).

**Child disruptive peer behavior.** Adoptive mothers and fathers completed the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (McWayne et al., 2002) at child age 4.5 years. Parents reported on children's peer play behaviors on a 4-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*, with high scores indicating greater occurrence of social or antisocial behavior. The 11-item disruption subscale included items such as "starts fights and arguments," "disrupts the play of others," and "rejects the play ideas of others." Internal consistency estimates were good for mothers and fathers ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ , respectively).

**Control variables.** A composite measure of prenatal influences was used to assess birth mothers' pregnancy complications; neonatal complications; exposure to environmental toxins; and use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. This measure of prenatal influences was not found to be associated with any variable in the current study. To further control for any possible prenatal influences, this measure was residualized out of the birth mother low behavioral

motivation variable, ensuring that any association between birth mother low behavioral motivation and toddler low social motivation was not due to variance associated with prenatal influences. In addition, adoptive parent reports of child peer disruption partialled out the effect of adoption openness (contact between adoptive and birth parents). Adoption openness was not found to be associated with any variable in the current study.

## Statistical Analyses

Path analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM; Muthén, & Muthén, 2007) was used to conduct all primary statistical analysis. All relevant statistical assumptions inherent to the application of SEM (e.g., multivariate normalcy) were examined and affirmed a priori. Correlations between primary theoretical constructs were initially examined. Following this, path analysis was used to examine the associations linking birth mother low behavioral motivation to mother-child and father-child hostility via toddler low social motivation and the subsequent influence of hostility on disruptive peer behavior. Model tests were conducted using Mplus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). There was an available sample of 316 cases. Within this sample, the Little's test of missing data indicated that the data were missing completely at random,  $\chi^2(84) = 82.62$ ,  $p = .52$ , with the following proportion of missingness for each variable: birth mother low behavioral motivation: 12%, toddler low social motivation: 19%, mother-child hostility: 10%, father-child hostility: 12%, mother report of child disruptive peer behavior: 23%, and father report of child disruptive peer behavior: 30%. Multiple imputation with data augmentation was used to generate values for missing data across relevant theoretical variables within the proposed model using NORM 2.03 (Schafer, 1997), regarded as the most robust method for multiple imputation (Allison, 2001).

## Results

### Correlational Analysis

Intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations for the sample are located in Table 1. Significant associations were found supporting the proposed theoretical model. Birth mother low behavioral motivation was significantly related to toddler low social motivation, as well as to mother-child hostility. Toddler low social motivation was significantly related to mother- and father-child hostility. Mother- and father-child hostility were signifi-

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Indicators of Theoretical Constructs

Variable	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Birth mother low behavioral motivation	25.26 (5.64)	—					
2. Toddler low social motivation	32.98 (7.98)	.17*	—				
3. Mother-child hostility	9.01 (2.50)	.16**	.19**	—			
4. Father-child hostility	8.94 (2.47)	-.04	.21**	.24***	—		
5. Peer disruptive behavior (mother report)	20.90 (3.84)	.02	.11	.24**	.19**	—	
6. Peer disruptive behavior (father report)	20.61 (3.42)	-.03	.11	.18†	.31***	.45***	—

Note. Means and standard deviations reflect raw values.

†  $p < .06$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

cantly related to mother's and father's reports of disruptive peer behavior.

### Full Theoretical Model

As an initial step, the direct influence of birth mother low behavioral motivation on adoptive mother- and father-child hostility was tested. Birth mother low behavioral motivation was found to be significantly associated with greater mother-child hostility ( $B = .07$ ,  $SE B = .03$ ,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .007$ ), with both mother- and father-child hostility predicting greater mother and father reports of disruptive peer behavior within-rater ( $B = .32$ ,  $SE B = .12$ ,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $p = .007$ , and  $B = .41$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively) and father-child hostility predicting greater mother-reported disruptive peer behavior ( $B = .22$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Following these initial tests, the full proposed theoretical model was examined, with results presented in Figure 1. Birth mother low behavioral motivation was found to significantly predict toddler low social motivation ( $B = .21$ ,  $SE B = .08$ ,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p = .01$ ), which in turn significantly predicted mother- and father-child hostility ( $B = .06$ ,  $SE B = .02$ ,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .005$ , and  $B = .08$ ,  $SE B = .02$ ,  $\beta = .22$ ,  $p = .01$ , respectively). A significant direct association from birth mother low behavioral motivation to mother-child hostility was also found ( $B = .06$ ,  $SE B = .03$ ,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Mother- and father-child hostility were found to predict mother and father reports of disruptive peer behavior within-rater ( $B = .31$ ,  $SE B = .11$ ,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .008$ , and  $B = .40$ ,  $SE B = .11$ ,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively), with father-child hostility also predicting mother-reported disruptive peer behavior ( $B = .21$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p = .04$ ).

Because initial tests did not indicate a significant association between birth mother low behavioral motivation and father-child hostility, that portion of the model did not meet the criteria that Baron and Kenny (1986) described as necessary to define a mediational pathway. However, an independent variable can have an *indirect effect* on a dependent variable even if the two variables are not correlated, if the independent variable influences a third, intervening variable, which in turn affects the dependent variable (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000; MacKinnon et al., 2002). If the independent and dependent variables are each related to the proposed intervening variable, the significance of the indirect

association between the independent and dependent variables can then be assessed statistically. We examined whether birth mother low behavioral motivation had an indirect effect on mother- and father-child hostility through the intervening variable of toddler low social motivation, using procedures outlined by Sobel (1982) to test the significance of all indirect effects. Significant indirect effects were found from birth mother low behavioral motivation and greater within-rater mother- and father-child hostility via toddler low social motivation ( $B = .01$ ,  $SE B = .01$ ,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $p = .04$ , and  $B = .02$ ,  $SE B = .01$ ,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .03$ , respectively) as well as between toddler low social motivation and mother and father reports of disruptive peer behavior via within-rater reports of mother- and father-child hostility ( $B = .02$ ,  $SE B = .01$ ,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $p = .04$ , and  $B = .02$ ,  $SE B = .01$ ,  $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .02$ , respectively). A marginally significant indirect effect was also found between toddler low social motivation and mother reports of disruptive peer behavior via father-child hostility ( $B = .02$ ,  $SE B = .01$ ,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $p = .06$ ). A good fit between the data and model was suggested by fit indices,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.31$ , root-mean-square error of approximation = .00, comparative fit index = 1.00, Tucker-Lewis index = 1.06, standardized root-mean-square residual = .008.

### Discussion

The present study utilized an adoption design to examine the evocative association between genetic influences on toddler low social motivation and mother-child and father-child hostility, and the subsequent relation with child disruptive peer behavior at age 4.5. Both the correlational and model results indicated a significant association between birth mother low behavioral motivation and toddler low social motivation, which in turn was related to both adoptive mother- and father-child hostility. This process suggests evocative *rGE*, where a genetic liability for low behavioral motivation manifested as toddler low social motivation evokes greater hostility in both the mother-child and father-child relationships. Mother-child hostility predicted mother report of later disruptive peer behavior in the child, whereas father-child hostility predicted both father and mother report of disruptive peer behavior in the child. Given the absence of genetic relatedness between adoptive parents and their adopted child, passive *rGE* cannot explain the association between mother and father hostility and disruptive peer

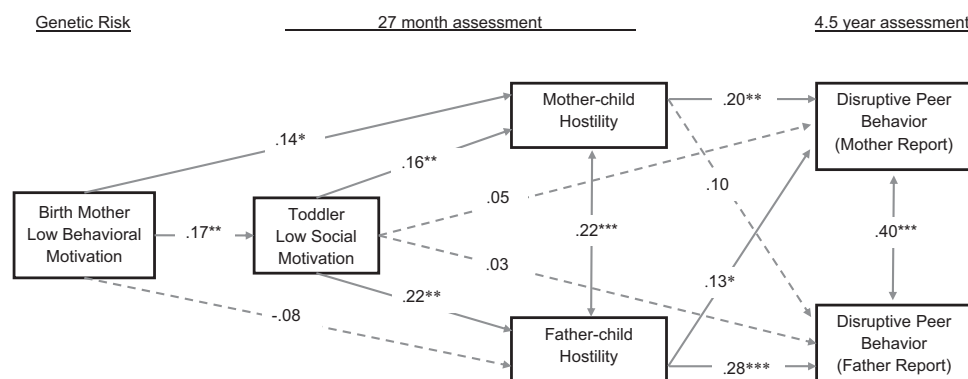


Figure 1. Full theoretical model results. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

behavior. As mother and father hostility were examined separately, a distinct influence of father–child hostility appeared to confer greater risk for disruptive peer behavior. This study advances the investigation of evocative *rGE* and environmental mediation by examining both in the context of the same study, where these processes can be detected and distinguished given the absence of genetic relatedness.

Whereas previous twin (Burt, McGue, Krueger, & Iacono, 2005; Narusyte et al., 2011; Pike, McGuire, Hetherington, Reiss, & Plomin, 1996) and adoption (O'Connor, Deater-Deckard, Fulker, Rutter, & Plomin, 1998) studies have suggested evocative *rGE* between antisocial-type behaviors and negative parenting practices in adolescence, little research has focused on temperamental aspects of child behavior in early childhood, where evocative *rGE* has also been evidenced (Boivin et al., 2005; Forget-Dubois et al., 2007). The present study advances this area of research by first illustrating a significant association between birth mother low behavioral motivation and toddler low social motivation, suggesting that this temperamental behavior is genetically informed. Evidence of evocative *rGE* was suggested where toddler low social motivation predicted greater mother–child and father–child hostility. This pattern of effects was strengthened by the presence of indirect effects from birth mother low behavioral motivation to both mother– and father–child hostility operating via toddler low social motivation. These results suggest that a genetic liability for low social motivation early in life elicits hostile parenting from both mothers and fathers. This finding is noteworthy, as little research has previously examined these constructs (Boivin et al., 2005; Forget-Dubois et al., 2007), especially with regard to the relative effects of mother and father parenting practices considered in the same context. Additionally, this evocative relation appears to be relatively equivalent on both mother and father hostility, possibly indicating that both mothers and fathers are similarly responsive in a hostile manner to difficult aspects of their child's temperament. Also, the presence of a remaining direct path from birth mother low behavioral motivation to mother–child hostility in the final model indicates that some other unmeasured variable may still mediate this evocative relationship (e.g., toddler internalizing symptoms). Compared to father–child hostility, genetically influenced aspects of low child social motivation may be more likely to evoke hostile parenting in mothers.

Findings from the present study also examined the subsequent effect of parental hostility on later disruptive peer behavior. Past research has illustrated the unique influences of mother–child hostility and father–child hostility on child social outcomes, suggesting that where fathers' parenting toward the child is harsh, hostile, and overt, it may be more detrimental to children's social behavior (Kelley et al., 1998; Mitchell & Cabrera, 2009). The present pattern of results fits with prior research; both mother–child and father–child hostility predicted their own report of disruptive peer behavior. Father–child hostility also predicted mothers' report of disruptive peer behavior. This may indicate that father–child hostility in the family context is more salient in child socialization and, when present, that it confers a greater risk for later aggressive-type behaviors, including those occurring in social settings. Further, similar to past genetically sensitive studies, the current use of an adoption sample controlled for passive *rGE*, removing this as a potential mechanism underlying the association between hostility in the mother–child and father–child relation-

ships and disruptive peer behavior. Thus, it can be concluded with greater confidence that the transmission mechanism linking parent–child hostility to disruptive peer behavior is explained by the environmental salience of negative parenting.

The most notable advance of the present study over past research is the examination of evocative *rGE* between toddler low social motivation on parent–child hostility while also controlling for passive *rGE*, in the longitudinal interplay between hostile parenting and disruptive peer behavior. This is especially relevant given that the present age range, 2 to 4 years of age, appears to be a period across which both evocative and passive *rGE* may occur, as during middle childhood children still spend the majority of their time out of school with their parents. In nongenetically sensitive studies, disruptive behavior in early childhood predicts negative parent–child responses (Combs-Ronto, Olson, Lunkenheimer, & Sameroff, 2009) and greater vulnerability to the effects of negative parenting (Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011). This is supported by research indicating the presence of evocative *rGE* effects between infants' and toddlers' difficult behavior and parents' hostile–reactive behavior (Boivin et al., 2005; Forget-Dubois et al., 2007). When temperamental problems are present in early childhood, such as these, they appear to evoke negative parenting. When considered collectively, this suggests a cascading effect (i.e., Scaramella & Leve, 2004), where risk for child behavioral dysfunction in childhood originates early in life and negative parenting practices arising in response to temperamental difficulty subsequently contribute to child disorder later in life (Kiff et al., 2011; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2008). The present study advances previous research by testing both processes within the same longitudinal design, illustrating that children's genetic propensities early in life that manifest as undesirable behaviors (low social motivation) can elicit hostile parenting and through (likely) environmental routes affect later child development (disruptive peer behavior).

### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Whereas the ability to examine evocative *rGE* between toddler low social motivation and hostile parenting served as a primary strength of the present study, toddler low social motivation only partially mediated the influences from birth mother low behavioral motivation to mother–child hostility. This indicates that an unmeasured aspect of the child may further mediate this relationship. Another limitation in the present examination of evocative *rGE* was that toddler low social motivation and parent–child hostility were measured at the same time of assessment. This limits the ability to draw inference between these constructs, which would be strengthened by longitudinal separation (Rutter, 2007). However, the direction of effects observed in the present study fits with the pattern of evocative effects observed in past research in both genetically sensitive longitudinal studies (Boivin et al., 2005; Forget-Dubois et al., 2007) and meta-analysis of normative samples (Kiff et al., 2011). An additional limitation was that the proportion of variance explained in disruptive peer behavior was small, indicating significant influence of other unmeasured variables on disruptive peer behavior. Despite this limitation, the measurement of parenting and child outcome in the present study were longitudinally separated, allowing for a more confident as-



sumption that parent hostility predicted disruptive peer behavior. Future research is needed where each parent and child construct are separated longitudinally to further assure this pattern of effects. Finally, the present study relied on adoptive parent report of both adoptive parent and child behavior. This limitation was partially addressed by using a cross-rater approach including mother and father report of both hostility and disruptive peer behavior, which allowed examination of the relative effects of mothers and fathers. However, shared method variance may be a factor in confounding the pattern of associations noted between parent-reported family interaction patterns and children's disruptive peer behavior, such that noted associations are amplified by the presence of shared method variance. In order to address this concern, we partitioned our proposed theoretical model and ran separate mother-child and father-child models (using opposite-parent report of child disruptive peer behavior). Results were replicated with no substantial differences to the pattern of results reported for the full theoretical model.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these limitations, the present study illustrates the unique opportunity that an adoption design confers in the parallel examination of evocative *r*GE and environmental mediation. Further, this study facilitated investigation of these mechanisms within the context of family processes (parenting) in a longitudinal design. As a result, the study advances important objectives in the study of child development by identifying associations that are not confounded by shared genetic influences. This is especially relevant as social skills and positive social interactions are vital for the promotion of child resilience in the face of genetic and environmental risks (Rutter, 2012). This underscores the importance and relevance of the present study in identifying aspects of mother's and father's parenting that impinge on social development applicable to prevention and intervention programs.

<sup>1</sup> Results from these analyses may be obtained by writing to the corresponding authors.

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