

The Effects of Children's Perceptions of Attachment Security and Emotion Regulation on School Disengagement among Elementary School Truants

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Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine how children's perceptions of emotional bonds and children's emotion regulation predict school disengagement among elementary school truants. Truancy has been presented as a prevalent social problem associated with school dropout, substance abuse, gang involvement, and criminal activities. As an early childhood risk, school truancy is identified as a developmental pathway to more serious, later criminal careers (Loeber & Farrington, 2000).

Research Background and Hypotheses

The truancy intervention literature indicates that involvement of parents has been found to improve a child's school adjustment for school truancy problems and for elementary school children, specifically. Research has established relationships between various family and environmental factors and school adjustment including truancy, but there remains a scarcity of research investigating the relationships between specific areas of parent-child relationships and a child's school truancy behavior. In attempting to understand the development of delinquency and antisocial activities, researchers have investigated a number of potential contributing factors. Parental factors involving discipline practices and the quality of the parent-child relationship have been identified as strong predictors in delinquency studies including truancy (Rosenfeld, Richmand, & Bowen, 2000). Child-parent attachment in particular has been identified as an important developmental foundation of the child-parent relationship.

Numerous empirical findings indicate that a child's attachment quality has profound effects on various behavioral problems at school settings (Moss et al., 1996 & 1998). The problem behaviors related to school also are predicted by children's management of their emotions (Eisenberg, et al, 1997). On the other hand, concerning school truancy as a subtype of conduct disordered behaviors, children's conduct problems are associated with family risk factors including the lack of parent availability and responsiveness, inconsistency in parenting, and lack of limit setting, monitoring and supervision (Morrison, Macdonald, & LeBlanc, 2000). Supportively, school-aged

children with secure attachments tend to have closer parental monitoring and better cooperation in monitoring situations (Kerns & Aspelmeier, 2001).

Using attachment theory to examine students' truancy risk and other school behavior problems, it is expected that children's emotion regulation capabilities would be an intervening factor between qualities associated with emotional bonds and school disengagement. Research has demonstrated that children with poor attachments to their caregivers tend to use inappropriate strategies to regulate their negative emotions, perhaps in an attempt to express their needs for security, whereas children with secure attachments to their caregivers tend to manage their negative emotions more favorably (Duchesne & Larose, 2007). Thus, children who have secure attachments with their caregivers may be better able to tolerate potentially stressful school situations and exhibit appropriate behavioral management skills in the school setting also. As a result, attachment security to caregivers may decrease the risk of the development of behavioral problems and truancy risk in school.

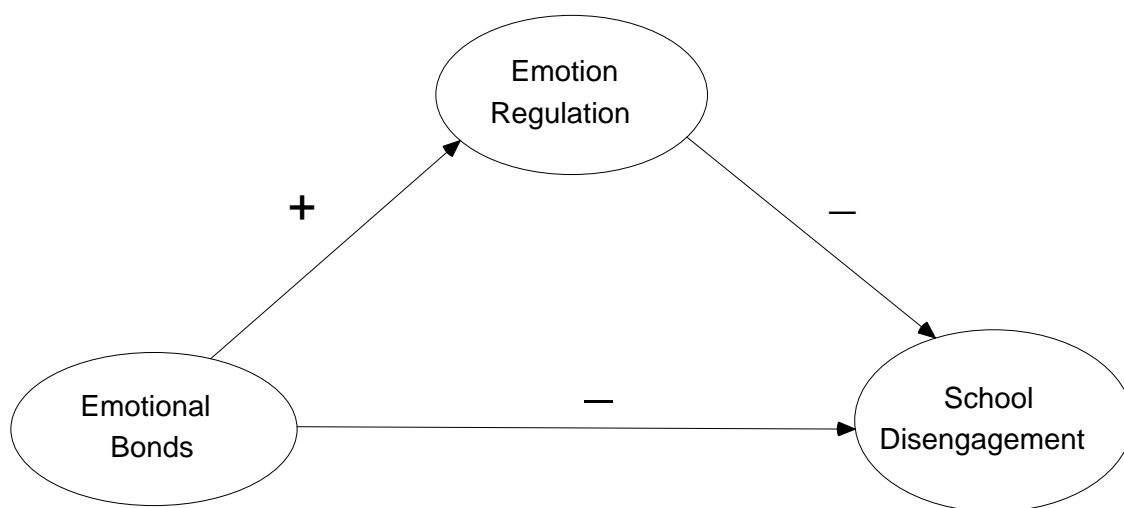


Figure 1: The School Disengagement Model

The Research Hypotheses:

1. Elementary school truants who report of high quality child-parent emotional bonds will be likely to have high levels of emotion regulation.
2. Elementary school truants who report of high quality child-parent emotional bonds will be less likely to show school disengagement, indicated by fewer behavior problems and low continued truancy risk level.
3. Elementary school truants with high levels of emotion regulation will be less likely to show school disengagement, indicated by fewer behavior problems and low continued truancy risk level.

Methodology

Participating children were recruited through the Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASC) program, located in a southern state, which is designed to provide early identification, assessment, and intervention to prevent continued unauthorized school absences of public school children in grades K through five. The study sample was selected from the high-risk group of children (ages 7 to 12 years) to better understand the experience of children with well-established patterns of truancy. A total of 93 children and their parents were contacted for this study. Of the 93 students, completed measurements were obtained for 74. All but one of these 74 children were African American. There were 46 males and 28 females with a mean age of 9.11 years (range 7 to 13 years). The modal age was eight ($n = 24$) and the age with fewest children was thirteen ($n = 1$). Regarding grade, more than half of the children ($n = 43$) were in grades three to five.

Data collection involving children and parents was administered in two settings, school buildings and truancy court. Four standardized survey instruments were completed by 74 truants and their parents and teachers, and secondary data collected by the East Baton Rouge (EBR) TASC center, Louisiana during the 2006-2007 academic years.

The goal of this study was to test a theoretical causal model on the order of the one shown in appendix 1. To test the hypothesized causal model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to explore the interrelationship among three latent (construct) variables (children's perception of emotional bonds, emotion regulation, and school disengagement). Also, this study tested MIMIC model in the SEM to examine the relationship between three sample characteristic variables (age, grade, and resistant status) and three latent variables. Additionally, hierarchical regression analysis was utilized to support the school disengagement model.

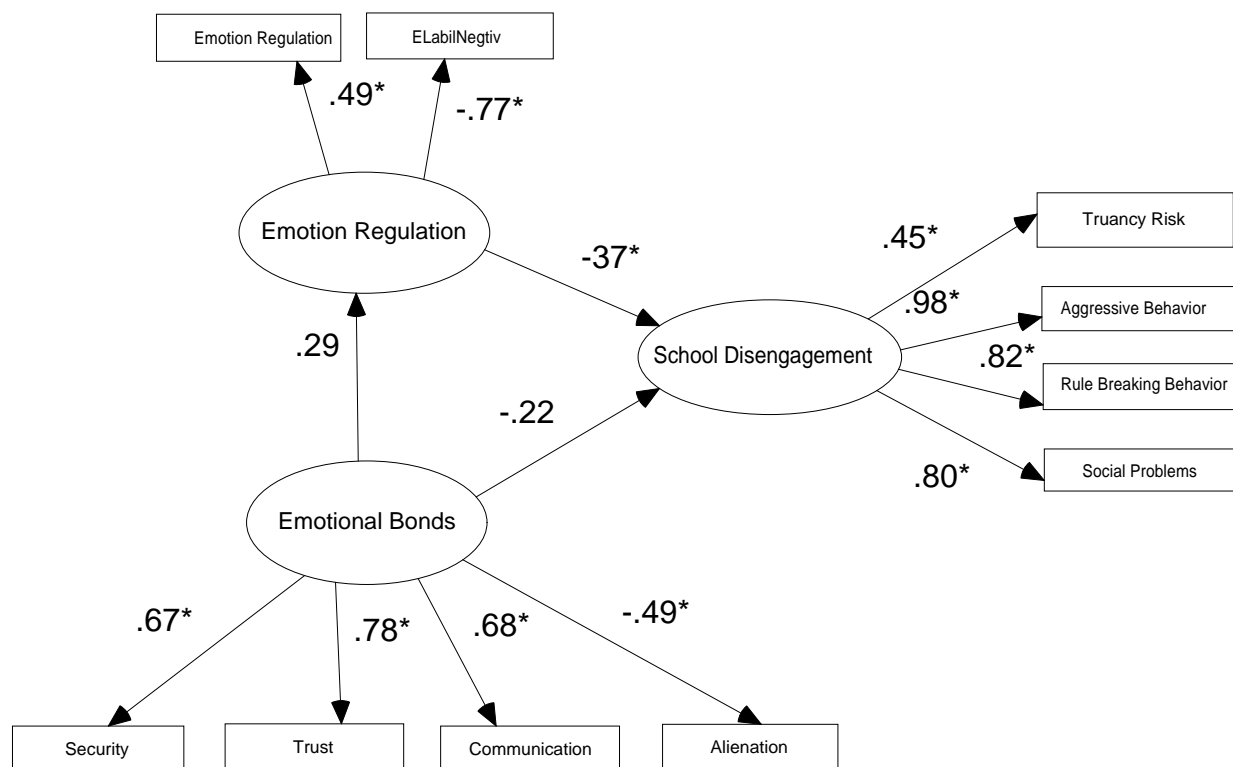


Figure 2: MIMIC Model of School Disengagement

Results

The structural equation model had a good fit to the data (AGFI = .88, NFI = .91, RMSEA = .00). The findings indicate that children's emotional regulatory capacity is a significant predictor of school disengagement ($\beta = .38$, $t = 3.7$, $p = .03$). Contrary to expectations, the emotional bonds of children did not significantly predict emotion regulation or school disengagement in the model. However, bi-variate results indicated that two indicators of emotional bonds, children's perceptions of attachment security ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$) and trust ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$), were associated with children's risk for aggressive behavior. The result of hierarchical regression also showed that children's emotional bonds was statistically significant predictor of children's externalizing behavior problems at .10 level ($\beta = -.27$, $t = -1.90$). The MIMIC model showed that gender was a good predictor of children's perceptions of attachment security ($\beta = .31$, $t = 2.27$, $p = .02$), but age and resistant status were not predictors on all latent variables in the model. School-aged girls were more likely to feel stronger emotional bonds to their parents than school-aged boys.

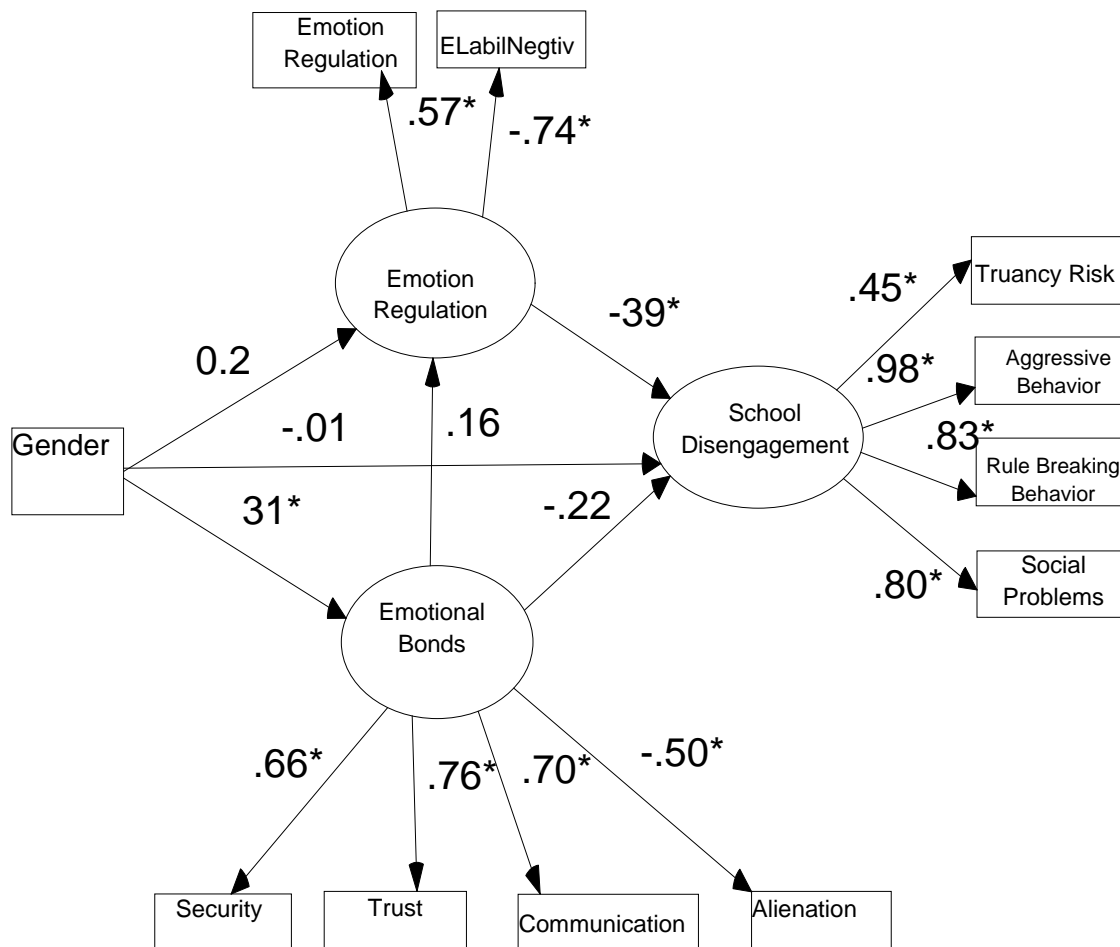


Figure 3: MIMIC Model of School Disengagement

Utility for Social Work Practice

This study addresses knowledge gaps in the theoretical and empirical literature on the inter-relationships among children's perceptions of emotional bonds, emotion regulation, and school disengagement in high-risk, African American, public elementary school truants. The findings of the current study supported parts of attachment theory by providing support for the prediction of school disengagement (aggression) by children's perceptions of attachment-related security (security and trust). This finding implies that positive parenting practices, which encourage children's trust and emotional bonds, should receive attention in interventions targeted at helping truant elementary children to learn appropriate behavioral interaction at school.

In a developmental framework, children's adequate emotion regulation skills reflect their developing social competence and adaptation to situational demands and expectations (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Therefore, deficiencies in socially acceptable emotion regulation skills, both underregulating (i.e., acting-out) or overregulating (e.i.,

inhibited) expression of emotions, appear to be an important contributing factors to children's school adjustment and behavior problems (Thompson & Meyer, 2007).

The current study findings with respect to emotion regulation suggest that school policies that focus exclusively on punishment of children's bad behavior are likely to be inadequate. These children need to be provided with opportunities to obtain services that can help them to learn to achieve emotion regulation skills. It is important to consider the implementations for programs that help children to regulate emotion in promoting school engagement. An intervention program which helps children to understand the causes and consequences of their emotions will give children an opportunity to develop emotion regulation skills. In the United States, so far only one school-based prevention program focusing on preschool and elementary school children's emotion competence skills, the PATHS curriculum has been developed and evaluated with respect to effectiveness to prevent disruptive behavior problems (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995). Designing and providing an intervention program to encourage children's emotion regulation may be necessary for elementary school truant children to reduce truancy risk and other school related problem behaviors.

Finally, as suggested by the research on parental influence on the development of children's emotion regulation, parental socialization with their children is not to be ignored in intervention process. Parents can influence their children's emotional regulatory capacity both directly and indirectly through modeling emotional behavior with encouragement, comforting, and expression of their emotion, and discussion of emotion-related topics (Zeman, Cassano, Perry, & Stegall, 2006). However, positive parental socialization effects are only possible when parents possess their own abilities to regulate emotion (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). An intervention program to encourage children's emotion regulation should foster parenting practices associated with parents' emotion regulation development which encourage parents' self-awareness of own emotion and acknowledge the effect of parents' responses to their child's negative emotionality and the consequent disruptive behaviors (Zeman et. al., 2006).

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