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## Survey on Current Interventions for Childhood Problem Behavior and their Link to Future Criminal Behavior

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*Survey on Current Interventions for Childhood Problem Behavior and their Link to Future  
Criminal Behavior*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the  
Department of Psychology

By

Jada Stevens

Under the mentorship of Dr. Denice Rios-Mojica

**Abstract**

Criminal behavior is a prevalent concern for many communities. As such, researchers and clinicians often look for core causes of criminal behavior to address them early. Some theorize that childhood problem behavior is a common predictor of adult criminal behavior. As a result, emphasis is often placed on addressing childhood problem behavior early in order to prevent future criminal behavior. The current study explores the link between childhood problem behavior and adult criminal behavior. Specifically, we will look at how middle school teachers are addressing childhood problem behavior and how that relates to future predictions of criminal behavior. Data will be collected by administering surveys to various middle school teachers throughout the state. Results from the survey will help identify current trends and needs for addressing problem behavior to successfully prevent future criminal behavior.

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## **Survey on Current Interventions for Childhood Problem Behavior and their Link to Future Criminal Behavior**

Criminal behavior is a major problem in many communities. In 2019, for example, 288,419 crimes were reported in the state of Georgia alone (Georgia Bureau of Investigation, 2019). Given its prevalence across the nation, many have tried to identify the initial causes of criminal behavior and the factors that lead someone to commit crimes. Researchers have found individuals who commit crimes are not first-time offenders (Basto-Pereira et al., 2022; Raghuvanshi, 2020). In fact, most individuals who commit crimes have engaged in criminal behavior throughout their lifetime (Raghuvanshi, 2020). This has led researchers to focus on childhood criminal and antisocial behavior, such as problem behavior (Basto-Pereira et al., 2022; Raghuvanshi, 2020). Many have theorized that childhood problem behavior can lead to adult criminal behavior (Basto-Pereira et al., 2022). As a result, different theories and links have been formed to explain the relationship between childhood problem behavior and adult criminal behavior.

One theory that tries to explain the relationship between childhood problem behavior and adult criminal behavior is social learning theory. According to social learning theory, criminal behavior is learned through observation (Fox, 2017). Specifically, children learn antisocial and problematic behaviors by observing parental figures engage in those behaviors because parental figures are their main role models (Biglan, 2019; Fox, 2017). Children can perceive bad behavior as a valid way to solve problems. This can lead to children engaging in the same behavior themselves later on in their lives. Another theory that tries to explain the complex relationship between childhood problem behavior and adult criminal behavior is the theory that looks at childhood trauma. According to this approach, throughout adolescence children can experience

events that are traumatic or stressful that are defined as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Basto-Pereira et al., 2022). Examples of these adverse experiences are abuse (emotional or physical), neglect, and household dysfunction. Basto and colleagues (2022) stated these adverse experiences have negative effects on children, which causes them to be more likely to engage in antisocial and criminal behavior.

A third and final theory looks at the relationship of the use of punishment with children and how that can lead to adult criminal behavior. According to Raghuvanshi's et al. (2020), there is a significant association between parental punishment, antisocial, and criminal behaviors. In their study, Raghuvanshi's et al. surveyed 100 criminals and 100 non-criminals and asked them about whether their parents use punishment. Out of the 100 criminals, almost 50% said punishment was used by their parents. Raghuvanshi et al. found a statistically significant correlation between the use of punishment and criminal behavior.

The theories mentioned above all involve learning of antisocial and problematic behavior at a very young age. Specifically, according to the theories mentioned above, children learn to engage in problematic behaviors as a direct result of their environment and experiences. Behavior analysis is a science that looks at how human behavior is influenced by environmental variables (Cooper et al., 2019). One common theory or principle of behavior analysis is the principle of positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is when a positive stimulus is added to the environment after a behavior that makes it more likely for the behavior to occur (Cooper et al., 2019).

A better approach to decreasing childhood problem behavior, and subsequently, adult criminal behavior, might be to use positive reinforcement strategies. In a book by Tony Biglan titled *The nurture effect* (2019), Biglan outlines some of the most successful reinforcement-based

approaches to addressing problematic and antisocial behaviors in large communities. Some examples of reinforcement-based approaches include reinforcing good social behavior, setting limits on influences that could cause problem behavior, promoting prosocial values, and minimizing toxic conditions. He also states that in his studies families with behavior problems were able to reduce their child's problem behavior through reinforcement.

The strategies mentioned by Biglan (2019) could be applied in a variety of different settings. One setting where these positive reinforcement strategies could be most helpful is in a school setting. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to look at how teachers are currently addressing childhood problem behaviors. Specifically, we are interested in the prevalence of the use of punishment versus reinforcement-based strategies in middle schools with adolescents who engage in problematic or antisocial behavior. To approach this topic, I will be using a survey to determine what teachers are using and how they are incorporating it into their classroom. I expect to find that teachers are using mostly punishment-based methods to solve problem behavior. The timeline for this study will be approximately 4 months.

### **Methods**

A survey was created to examine how middle school teachers are addressing childhood problem behavior. The next sections of the outline will give more information on the survey and the procedures for recruiting participants.

### **Materials**

The survey contained five demographic questions, two likert scale questions about interventions used on problem behavior and problem behavior seen in classrooms. The likert scale questions 11 multiple choice questions, 18 questions in total that are split into five different

sections: problem behavior, criminal behavior, interventions, training/support, and demographics.

### **Results**

Although we had a total of 6 responses, a closer look into the data revealed that for most items, only 1 or 2 respondents answered the question. As a result, our data is extremely limited to the reports of only a couple of individuals. We will discuss the issue of low reporting later in this paper.

### **Participants**

No demographic information was reported by the respondents. As a result, we do not have any information related to this for the study. A total of 6 respondents consented to participate in the study and complete the survey. However, only two respondents answered all survey items. Both respondents opted to not answer the demographic questions.

### **Classroom Problem Behavior**

We first asked about how often respondents saw problems in their classrooms. The problem behaviors that were reported as “I see it a lot” were verbal outburst, leaving without permission, physical aggression, non-compliance, not attending, and other problem behaviors that respondents did not specifically state.

Respondents were then asked to report on how many students in their classroom engaged in problem behavior. One respondent said they had between 0 to 3 students engaging in problem behaviors. The other respondents said they had between 4 to 5 students engaging in problem behaviors.

Respondents were then asked about methods they used to respond to problem behavior. Specifically, we gave the respondents a list of both reinforcement and punishment-based

strategies and asked them to identify which methods they used to address problem behavior in their classroom. The methods that were reported by respondents were rewarding “good behavior”, use of preventative strategies (i.e., removing distractions), setting up expectations in the classroom, encouraging positive behavior, check in/check out method, school wide positive behavior interventions, parent meetings, and a category labeled as “other methods”. When asked to list the other methods that were used, the respondents did not list them. Punishment-based methods, such as detention, expulsion, removal from the classroom, and loss of privileges, were not reported as being used in the classroom.

We also asked about the effectiveness of both reinforcement and punishment-based methods. One respondent stated that rewarding “good behavior”, use of preventative strategies, and check in/check out methods work very well for them. Setting up classroom expectations/rules, encouraging positive behaviors, removal from the classroom, loss of privileges, and other methods were reported as only “works sometimes”, and the suspension, expulsion, detention, parent meetings, and school-wide positive behavior interventions were reported as “never work”.

### **Training and Support with Classroom Problem Behavior**

Respondents were then asked about school-wide support and training they received related to managing problem behavior. Only one respondent reported that their school used a school-wide behavior management system. No other respondents answered this question, so we do not have information on whether a school-wide system was used for the other respondent. The same respondent said that they have received and completed 21+ hours of training related to managing problem behavior. Finally, when asked if they would like more training, the respondent said no.

### **Criminal Behavior and Classroom Problem Behavior**

A final question that was asked related to criminal behavior and its link to adolescent problem behavior. Specifically, we asked if they believe that adolescent problem behavior could lead to adult criminal behavior. One respondent said yes, they believe there is a link to criminal behavior and adolescent problem behavior. The same respondent stated that 20 of their previous students that engaged in persistent problem behavior engaged in criminal behaviors as adults.

### **Discussion**

During the process of recruiting educators, there were some struggles to get the survey out because of barriers put up by schools and their respective county education boards. For example, despite guaranteeing anonymity for the teachers, school administrators did not feel comfortable sending out our survey to their teachers. Additionally, some schools required additional review and approval of the study proposal in addition to the one provided by the authors' institution. Finally, some schools denied the request to share the survey with their teachers all together without any explanation. Although these barriers were discouraging, they are understandable. Most of these barriers are put up to protect schools and their teachers. According to Luci Nussbaum (2017), teaching staff are often wary of researchers' intentions because it may seem as if researchers have all the power in how society views schools and staff within those schools. This can lead to teaching staff wanting to hide certain practices and keep the broken system away from the limelight. Schools do not want the public to know that this modern system is just as broken as it was in the past and that very little has been done to change it.

It was great to see that positive reinforcement interventions were used but there is a little concern that there is a lack of details in the "other" category of behavior interventions. It is also



interesting that school-wide interventions were reported as never working even though these are the types of interventions that we know are most effective (Dad et al., 2010). So, if teachers do not feel supported by this type of intervention, it is important to find out why that is. Is it because of a disconnect between teachers and higher authority? Are teachers not being taught positive reinforcement strategies that are known to be effective?

Another important discussion point relates to the question on criminal behavior and problem behavior. Specifically, the respondent stated that they believed there was a link between criminal behavior and childhood problem behavior. While there are many theories that suggest this is true, this view may also serve as a bias. Specifically, individuals who believe this may unintentionally view an individual student who engages in problem behavior as a future criminal. In turn, this view could influence the individuals' interactions with the student. However, as with all our data, we must take this with a grain of salt given that this is the opinion of one individual teacher.

Given the many barriers and lack of responses we received through this project, it is difficult to make any recommendations for future research in this area. Reaching and working with school systems comes with many administrative red tapes. For us to begin to address the issues with childhood problem behavior and how to best support teachers, we first must get through the barriers of reaching out to educators and assessing their needs.

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