On the Intersections of Childhood Maltreatment, Self-Control, and Behavioral Outcomes Across the Life-Course

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ON THE INTERSECTIONS OF CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT, SELF-CONTROL, AND BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES ACROSS THE LIFE-COURSE

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DEDICATION

This piece of work is dedicated to two of my biggest supporters, my little sister and grandmother residing in Heaven. Alivia and Grandma, thank you for the strength you have continued to provide me with in order to complete this thesis as well as to further my desire to help those who may not be able to help themselves. This work makes a humble attempt to address an area of research that may effectively be used in order to find a greater understanding regarding the grave consequences of childhood abuse and neglect. To all of the individuals that have been subjected to this victimization and the aftereffects of such, this research is for you.
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To current and past victims of childhood abuse and neglect, I vow to continue to place a spotlight on the effects that you endure and will continue to advocate for the cease of this heinous crime for as long as it takes.

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ABSTRACT

On the Intersections of Childhood Maltreatment, Self-Control, and Behavioral Outcomes Across the Life-Course

(Written by Ameleigh Bippen under the guidance of Dr. Brian B. Boutwell)

Childhood abuse and neglect are highly deleterious experiences that a number of children continue to encounter. The purpose of the current discussion is to examine the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on the growth and development of self-control in early childhood. In service of this goal, several methods were employed, including a review of the historical and current research on the development of self-control. In addition to this, specific scientific theories and their advancements were analyzed to provide further insight into the connection between poor impulse regulation (and decision-making) and downstream linkages with criminal offending. Perhaps not surprisingly, evidence continues to accumulate suggesting that childhood abuse and neglect exerts a negative influence on the development of self-control, which has consistently emerged as a causal factor in the genesis of criminal offending. Several recommendations are made in the concluding chapter to address gaps in the current knowledge when it comes to the connection between low self-control from exposure to adverse childhood experiences and criminal offending.
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INTRODUCTION:

The topic of child abuse and neglect remains both a subject of intense research interest as well as a pressing social problem. In the United States, each state has provided its own individual definition of childhood abuse and neglect. The definition set by each state, however, is based on broad standards outlined in federal law. Federal legislation provides a foundation by identifying a set of acts or behaviors that define childhood abuse and neglect. Defined by the Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) in their 2020 edition of the *Child Maltreatment* journal, they relay the foundation of childhood abuse and neglect set by federal legislation as: “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (DHHS 2020, 34).

Based on this definition and the individual definitions of each state, on an annual basis, the DHHS reports that hundreds of thousands of children fall victim to childhood abuse and neglect in the United States. Specifically, it was reported in the 2020 edition of the agency’s *Child Maltreatment* journal that the national rounded number of victims in 2020 was 618,000, which showed a decrease in the national rounded number of victims from 2019, which was 656,000 (DHHS 2020, 13). The department collects annual data through the use of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The NCANDS is a federally sponsored effort that voluntarily collects data on all children who received a Child Protective Services (CPS) response (investigation or an alternative response) from child welfare agencies throughout the 50 states,
the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Following this collection of data, the information is used for the *Child Maltreatment* journal series in addition to being a critical source of information for many publications, reports, and activities of the federal government and other groups.

Using this system, the Department of Health & Human Services’ data from 2020 portrayed “three-quarters (76.1%) of victims are neglected, 16.5 percent are physically abused, 9.4 percent are sexually abused, and 0.2 percent are sex trafficked” (DHHS 2020, 2). From this data, it can be concluded that the most common form of reported experiences of maltreatment that children experienced in the United States in 2020 was neglect. As defined in Mississippi Code Title 43 Public Welfare, “neglected child” means a child “whose parent, guardian or custodian or any person responsible for his care or support, neglects or refuses, when able so to do, to provide for him proper and necessary care or support, or education as required by law, or medical, surgical, or other care necessary for his well-being” (MS. Stat. § 43-21-105, 2010).

Despite the results of the NCANDS, there is potentially some number of childhood abuse and neglect cases that continually go unreported. Determining the number of cases that remain unreported for various reasons remains a methodological difficulty. However, through a study of cases of child injury visits, clinician reports revealed a population of 1,683 suspected cases of injuries potentially stemming from child abuse or neglect (Flaherty et al. 2008). However, this study showed that only 95 of those cases were actually reported to CPS (Flaherty et al. 2008). Furthermore, of those 1,683 cases in the study, 27% of the injuries were considered likely or very
likely to be related to child abuse, and 76% of the injuries were considered to be possibly caused by abuse, but none of these cases were reported (Flaherty et al. 2008). Ultimately, this study concluded that clinicians reported only 6% of the 1,683 patients to CPS, which does not provide a definite number of unreported cases of childhood abuse and neglect, but it does provide an area of concern when it comes to the silent yet deleterious nature of this victimization (Flaherty et al. 2008).

As was noted previously, the topic of childhood abuse and neglect remains one of high importance for both policy makers and researchers across various academic fields. This is partially the case due to the heinous and underrepresented nature of the crime as well as due to research that has shown that a prominent aftereffect of childhood abuse and neglect also has a connection to delinquency and criminal offending later on in life. This prominent aftereffect is a deficit in the development of self-control.

In order to specifically examine the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on the development of self-control it is first useful to briefly give a general overview regarding current knowledge related to the development of self-control in general. When it comes to childhood abuse and neglect, some of the most prominent criminological theories advance the idea that exposure to childhood abuse and neglect may contribute to an inability to regulate impulsive behaviors later in development, which in turn further increases the risk for antisocial behavior and criminal behaviors with age (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Gottfredson and Hirschi’s general theory of crime (1990), in particular, places a heavy emphasis on the role of effective parenting styles in the inculcation of self-control in children. Importantly, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory also offers reason to suspect a link between childhood abuse and neglect victimization, and the deficits in the development of effective self-control capabilities. Owing to
this, the goal of this review is to probe prominent criminological theories and their advances to
address the aftermaths of childhood abuse and neglect, and areas within this discussion that
represent a need for further research.

The following chapters will discuss the development of self-control and the widely
researched perspectives of criminological theories surrounding the causes of delinquency, crime,
and analogous behaviors. For this paper, the focus will remain on Gottfredson and Hirschi’s
Self-Control theory, which theorizes that individuals differ in the extent to which they develop
self-control. In combination with a review of Self-Control theory, this paper relies on various
studies that address possible connections between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such
as abuse and neglect, and deficits in self-control (Meldrum et al. 2020). Before progressing
further, it is important to recognize a key measurement issue related to the study of ACEs. In a
general study focused on identification and prevention, ACEs are defined as “potentially
traumatic events that occur in childhood and adolescence, such as experiencing physical,
emotional, or sexual abuse; witnessing violence in the home; having a family member attempt or
die by suicide; and growing up in a household with substance use, mental health problems, or
instability due to parental separation, divorce, or incarceration.” (Jones et al. 2019). In particular,
the term ACEs is broad and widely inclusive, capturing experiences beyond physical abuse and
neglect exclusively, and including other potentially adverse parenting practices such as the use of
corporal punishment (Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016). While bearing this in mind, this thesis
discusses studies of ACEs because they are relevant to the overall question of child maltreatment
early in life and the development of self-control.
CHAPTER I: The Development & Study of Self-Control

“Self-control is defined as the ability to forego acts that provide immediate or near-term pleasures, but that also have negative consequences for the actor, and as the ability to act in favor of longer-term interests” (Gottfredson 2017, 1). In other words, self-control is a quality that allows you to stop yourself from doing things that you want to do that might not be in your best interest or in the best interest of others around you at that time. For example, getting up early for work, and showing up on time, takes self-control. Now that the meaning of self-control has been addressed, it is important to understand the development of self-control within an individual. The majority of new research on this topic primarily bases the study of the development of self-control on Gottfredson and Hirschi’s Self-Control theory (1990). This heavily researched perspective in criminology holds that an individual’s level of self-control is primarily influenced by family or other caregiver behavior early on in one’s life (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990).

Of additional importance is the fact that the theory of self-control also addresses a process of socialization considered foundational in the development of self-control early in the life-course. In particular, the authors begin by arguing that: “parental concern for the welfare or behavior of the child is a necessary condition for successful child-rearing” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 98). The fundamental reason for beginning with this particular point is that it is considered closely linked to a child’s rearing experience defined by concerned and affectionate caregivers. Chief among their duties as such is to closely monitor and (proportionally) sanction behavior harmful to their child and others. In turn, this was considered essential for teaching
children to pay attention to the longer-term consequences and rewards of their actions, thus
instilling effective levels of self-control. Put another way, the minimum conditions necessary for
fostering the development of self-control, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), required
that “someone must 1) monitor the child’s behavior; 2) recognize deviant behavior when it
occurs; and 3) punish such behavior” (97).

In the absence of these family processes and associated positive socialization efforts by
parents or by another adult in the child’s life, the child may never learn to effectively delay
gratification, to be sensitive to others, or to plan for tomorrow. In more detail, Gottfredson and
Hirschi characterize a lack of self-control by six dimensions: impulsivity, risk-seeking, a
preference for simple (as opposed to complex) tasks, a preference for physical (as opposed to
mental) activities, self-centeredness, and anger. Nonetheless, when effective parenting is in
place, the attachment and caring relationships that exist between parents or caregivers and their
children, the recognition of deviant behaviors and disciplinary actions are assumed to be a
natural consequence of effective parenting. Furthermore, Self-Control theory suggests that these
high levels of established self-control, primarily due to socialization, appear to become stable
characteristics of the individual throughout their lifetime. Therefore, it is argued that the levels of
an individual’s self-control tend to remain consistent after the development of self-control, or
lack thereof, and remain steady throughout adulthood.

Due to the nature of the development of self-control occurring early on in life and the
socialization link to the establishment of self-control, adverse childhood experiences have been
examined as causes in the reduction of self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Botchkovar,
Gottfredson and Hirschi’s Self-Control theory (1990), at times when there is not a caregiver
present early on in the child’s environment or there is the presence of ineffective parenting (lack of parent-child attachment, inadequate supervision, or erratic discipline) it can be detrimental to the child’s socialization and ultimately the child’s development of self-control. However, since it is argued that self-control levels remain consistent throughout one’s lifetime, adverse childhood experiences may not only affect the development of self-control, it is also practical that they promote the effects of low self-control as one grows into adulthood. Based on current research, there are a number of possible negative effects that come as a result of a deficit of self-control, such as poor health, reduced educational achievement, criminal victimization, and illicit substance use (Hay and Meldrum 2016; Miller, Barnes, and Beaver 2011; Moffitt et al. 2011; Pratt et al. 2014). In addition to the potential negative effects above, multiple studies have identified a lack of self-control as one of the strongest correlates of delinquency and crime (Pratt and Cullen 2000; Vazsonyi, Mikuška, and Kelley 2017). Overall, within their work, Gottfredson and Hirschi (2001) explain the effects of early childhood socialization experiences and family processes:

All of us, it appears, are born with the ability to use force and fraud in pursuit of our private goals. Small children can and do lie, bite, whine, hit, and steal. They also sometimes consider horrendous crimes they are too small to carry off. By the age of eight or ten, most of us learned to control such tendencies to the degree necessary to get along at home and school. Others, however, continue to employ the devices of children to engage in behavior inappropriate to their age. The differences observed at ages 8 to 10 tend to persist from then on. Good children remain good. Not so good children remain a source of concern to their parents, teachers, and eventually to the criminal justice system. These facts lead us to conclude that low self-control is natural and that self-control is acquired in the early years of life. (90)

Ultimately, primarily focusing on parenting within the normal range of variation, the research of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) highlights the potential importance of early
childhood socialization by discussing a notable byproduct of ineffective parenting, low self-control.
CHAPTER II: Childhood Abuse & Neglect and its Effects into Adulthood

Now, the discussion moves towards the primary focus of this paper, childhood abuse and neglect, and the robust effects of such on psychological and behavior development. In the beginning of this paper the meaning of childhood abuse and neglect was pronounced as any recent act or failure to act on the part of the guardian or caregiver, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm, such as death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation. (DHHS 2020, 34). Therefore, due to an act or failure to act on the part of a guardian or caregiver, studies have shown that there are many potential aftereffects that victims of childhood abuse and neglect may suffer. These aftereffects include, but are not limited to, depression disorder, sexually transmitted infections, risky sexual behavior, risky lifestyle choices, and physical health outcomes, such as obesity, arthritis, ulcers, and headaches/migraines (Norman et al. 2012).

One recently conducted study directly examined potential causal impacts of adverse childhood experiences on depressive symptoms in early adulthood using a quasi-experimental analysis of twin siblings (Iob et al. 2021). Analyzing monozygotic (MZ) and dizygotic (DZ) twins, the study centered on the focal variables of adverse childhood experiences, salivary cortisol, and depressive symptoms (Iob et al. 2021). In order to understand the findings in this study, it is important to note that elevated cortisol levels have been shown to predict the risk of future depression onset in healthy individuals (Iob et al. 2021). Additionally, Iob and colleagues
(2021) focused on assessing the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder with a comorbid major depressive disorder, which have been shown to have lower salivary cortisol levels than controls, suggesting that it may represent a possible mediating pathway between variables. The main findings of this study show that children exposed to three or more ACEs had lower daytime cortisol levels at age 11 and elevated depressive symptoms at age 21 (Iob et al. 2021). It is noted that throughout this study both ACEs and cortisol remained *causally* associated with later depressive symptoms (Iob et al. 2021).

Another was previously completed to determine whether childhood physical and sexual abuse are associated with poor mental and physical health outcomes in older age addressed one of the leading concerns of this victimization, which is the presence of lifelong effects (Draper, et al. 2008). This study targeted the current physical and mental health of more than 21,000 adults aged 60 or greater who were currently under the care of general practitioners participating in the Depression and Early Prevention of Suicide in General Practice (DEPS-GP) Study. From those participants, nearly 1,458 (6.7%) and 1,429 (6.5%) reported childhood physical and sexual abuse (Draper et al. 2008). After the participants acknowledged whether it was childhood physical or sexual abuse that they had experienced, the participants were divided into two groups. When it came to physical health, the results of this study found that both childhood physical and sexual abuse were significantly associated with a greater risk of having three or more medical diseases (Draper et al. 2008).

Moving over to the mental health area of this study, it was found that both types of childhood abuse that were measured were significantly associated with a range of poor mental
health outcomes, such as high levels of depression and anxiety, and low happiness ratings (Draper et al. 2008). In addition to the effects found above, it was discovered that childhood physical and sexual abuse were more significantly associated with lower rates of marriage in late life, greater likelihood of living alone, more likely to be currently smoking or to have smoked previously, more likely to have current alcoholism consumption at potentially harmful levels, and significantly higher risk of lifetime suicidal behavior than those who had not experienced childhood sexual or physical abuse (Draper et al. 2008).

In addition to the psychological and behavioral outcomes of Draper el al. (2008), it is important to note that this research is consistent with the argument that self-control levels remain consistent throughout one’s lifetime as it provides information that some of the prominent effects of childhood abuse remain consistent throughout adulthood. In general, historically speaking, research on the effects of childhood abuse and neglect on the psychological and behavioral development has shown some of the most consistent and robust effects as disruptions in the development of attachment, prosocial behavior, self-esteem, attributional style, and cognitive skills as well as depression, anxiety, disruptive behavior, and posttraumatic stress (Skuse and Bentovim 1994; Green 1993; Cicchetti and Toth 1997). However, a growing area of research in criminology and studies on the effects of childhood abuse and neglect is the development of self-control and the effects that persist with the lack of this development.

Low Self-Control

As effects on the development of self-control have continued to become a more common topic of research, multiple studies have made a connection between childhood abuse and neglect and a deficit in self-control (Bunch et al. 2018, Botchkovar et al. 2015; Burt et al. 2006).
Historically, one of the most prominent criminological theories, that was previously addressed in this paper, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s Self-Control theory, proclaims self-control as a product curated in early childhood. In review of the material present above, Gottfredson and Hirschi theorized that individuals have varying levels of self-control, an individual’s level of self-control is primarily influenced by family or other caregiver behavior early in one’s life, and that an individual’s level of self-control is typically constant throughout one’s lifetime (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990).

Becoming one of the most researched topics in criminology, there are a number of studies that have tested Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory that ineffective parenting contributes to a lack of self-control. From these studies, there are a number of them that support this prediction (Bunch et al. 2018, Botchkovar et al. 2015; Burt et al. 2006), though others do not (Vera and Moon 2013; Wright and Beaver 2005). Therefore, while there is conflicting evidence that does not agree with Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory that ineffective parenting leads to low self-control, their overall general theory of crime still stands as one of the most prominent theories in the field of criminology.

Based on the extensive amount of supporting studies for Gottfredson and Hirschi’s Self-Control theory (1990), this work has generated a number of studies to test this theory in order to fully understand to what extent childhood abuse and neglect may affect self-control and many have concluded that a deficit in self-control is an aftereffect of childhood abuse and neglect victimization. A prominent study that was reviewed in the completion of this paper was a study addressing whether ACEs are associated with deficits in self-control (Meldrum et al. 2020). This study analyzed data collected from two large, independent samples of adolescents to determine whether adverse childhood experiences are associated with deficits in self-control, and concluded
that exposure to ACEs is associated with reduced self-control. When it came particularly to maltreatment ACEs, this study observed a negative association with self-control. Furthermore, this research has shown that a greater number of adverse childhood experiences is also associated with a higher deficit in self-control (Meldrum et al. 2020).

An additional study that was reviewed tested a comprehensive model based on Self-Control theory in seven different cultural and national samples based on cross-sectional data (Vazsonyi and Belliston 2007). Within this study, several key findings were made “family processes are predictive of self-control, that self-control is predictive of deviance, that parenting also has direct effects on deviance, and that these relationships are largely invariant across seven groups of middle and late adolescents that can be best characterized as varying on indicators of socioeconomic status, race, and national contexts” (Vazsonyi and Belliston 2007). The introduction of self-control as a predictor of deviance will be addressed in the following chapter.

Connection to Criminal Offending

As low self-control has become a large area of research as a result of childhood abuse and neglect victimization, low self-control has also emerged as one of the strongest predictors of delinquency and crime (Pratt and Cullen 2000; Vazsonyi et al. 2017). When it comes to low self-control, similar to when committing a crime, the acts associated with short-term pleasure all provide some immediate benefit for the individual, such as financial gain, sexual pleasure, etc. However, while focused on immediate benefit or relief, each act also carries with it a possibility of harmful consequences, such as being arrested or harming someone else.
Although Gottfredson (2006) links other areas to delinquency, such as the lack of closeness between delinquents and their parents, age distribution of crime, the delinquency of an individual’s friends, and even school performance, there is one factor in particular that supports the development of self-control and its link to delinquency. Gottfredson (2006) expresses this idea that early delinquency predicts later delinquency, which supports the theory behind the development of self-control that this development occurs early on in one’s life and once developed or not, the existence of self-control remains fairly consistent.
CONCLUSION:

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the findings detailed in the previous chapters. It may be concluded that the subjection to child abuse and neglect has negative results, such as low self-control and poor decision-making, which have consistently emerged as causal factors in the genesis of criminal offending. The study of Self-Control theory and its connection to childhood abuse and neglect has become an understood area of concern. Childhood abuse and neglect is a prominent public health problem, which requires more research in order to diffuse the aftereffects of childhood abuse and neglect victimization and the creation of this victimization in general. When it comes to the connection between low self-control and criminal offending these are areas in which it is necessary that research be continued. The existence of abuse and neglect in an individual’s early childhood is an issue that must be addressed in order to become proactive in improving the levels of self-control that children develop as well as a major step in eliminating delinquency through the greater development of self-control within individuals. In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest that studies of twins that have endured the same upbringing be completed in order to rule out genetic confounds when it comes to the development of self-control as well as further research addressing the connection between childhood abuse along with neglect and criminal offending.
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