

**Parental Monitoring and Legitimacy of Parental Authority:  
Flip Sides of the Same Coin?**

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**Abstract**

Although parental monitoring has long been shown to buffer adolescents against the risk of problem behavior, during adolescence, parental monitoring is dependent upon adolescents' willingness to share information with their parents and to obey the rules that they set. This paper examines the extent to which 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders' global belief in their obligation to obey rules set by their parents increases the power of parental monitoring to deter problem behavior, and undermines the influence of peers involved in problem behavior. Results indicate that adolescents who report their parents to be high in parental monitoring, who have a relatively greater belief in their obligation to obey parental rules, and who associate with fewer peers involved in problem behavior are less involved in problem behaviors themselves. Further, parental monitoring predicts adolescent substance use *only* when adolescents believe that they are obliged to obey rules that their parents set, and belief in their obligation to obey parents undermines the influence of associating with peers involved in problem behavior. These results underscore the active role that adolescents play in their reactions to family and peer influence.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the roles of parental monitoring, peers' problem behaviors, and adolescents' beliefs about legitimacy of parental authority in predicting adolescents' problem behaviors.

Literature reviews on adolescent problem behaviors have agreed that both parental monitoring and involvement with delinquent peers are important predictors of adolescent problem behaviors (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Loeber & Dishion, 1983). Parental monitoring has been consistently shown to be negatively related to adolescent problem behaviors (Fletcher et al., 1995; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Steinberg, 1986). However, during adolescence, parents' knowledge of children's whereabouts cannot be obtained unless children provide accurate information about their activities. Children spend more time without parents in adolescence and it makes parental monitoring highly depend on adolescents' willingness to share their personal information with parents. Combining with adolescents' increasing autonomy needs, parental monitoring tends to become more difficult during adolescence than childhood.

Furthermore, the discrepancies between adolescents' and parents' views of legitimacy of authority found in previous studies (Smetana, 1988; Youniss & Smollar, 1985) led us to expect that providing personal information to parents would depend on adolescents' beliefs about legitimacy of parental authority. Based on the expectation, we hypothesized that parental monitoring would only be effective if adolescents believe that parents have legitimate authority over adolescents' everyday decision making.

Involvement with delinquent peers has also been found to be positively related to adolescents' problem behaviors. However, it has been suggested that vulnerability to peer influence differ depending on individual and other contextual characteristics, such as parenting style, parental discipline, poor peer relationship, and academic achievement (Dishion et al., 1991; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995).

During adolescence, as children develop emotional autonomy from parents, they become more dependent on peers in various dimensions of decision making (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). However, as mentioned above, parents tend to believe that they have more legitimacy of authority over issues of adolescent everyday life than adolescents believe. It was found in a previous study (Smetana & Asquith, 1994) that parents see more issues as under parents' jurisdiction than adolescents and adolescents perceive these issues as contingent on their personal decisions. It is reasonable to think that adolescents who are willing to follow parents' decisions regarding their everyday issues, for example friendship issues, are less likely to become involved with problem behaviors.

This paper examines the extent to which 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders' global belief in their obligation to obey rules that their parents set increases the power of parental monitoring to deter problem behavior, and undermines the influence of peers involved in problem behavior.

**This study addresses 3 questions:**

- (1) Does parental monitoring undermine the influence of delinquent peers on adolescent problem behavior?**
- (2) Is legitimacy of parental authority more important when adolescents are not monitored effectively?**

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### (3) Are delinquent peers less influential when adolescents believe that they are obliged to obey parents' rules?

#### Method

##### Sample

The subjects were 398 adolescents (186 boys and 212 girls) in sixth, seventh and eighth grades from Pennsylvania. Participants completed self-report questionnaires as a part of 3-wave longitudinal study of adolescent developmental contexts. Data for the present analyses were obtained in 1996, which was the second wave of data collection.

##### Measures

*Parental monitoring.* Parental monitoring was assessed by the items regarding parents' knowledge of adolescents' everyday life (Fletcher, Darling, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1995). The items included five questions: "How much do your parents really know about who your friends are?, where you go at night?, how you spend your money?, what you do with your free time?, and where you are most afternoons after school?. The adolescents responded on a 3-point scale and the monitoring scores were obtained by calculating the means of five answers.

*Problem behaviors.* Problem behavior was assessed by items asking the frequency of cigarette smoking, alcohol use, binge drinking, and damaging property on purpose since the beginning of the school year (questionnaires were completed in February). The participants responded on a 4-point scale and the problem behavior scores were calculated by taking the mean of the 4 responses.

*Peers' problem behaviors.* In order to prevent the potential overestimation of peer influence due to the adolescents' tendency to over-report peers' problem behaviors (Kandel, 1996), peers' self-report, as opposed to adolescents' perceptions, was used in measuring peers' problem behaviors. The adolescents were asked to list names of their five close friends. Peers' problem behaviors were assessed by matching the provided friends' name and the friends' self-report on problem behaviors and by calculating the means of five friends' scores on problem behaviors. Only those adolescents who could be matched with at least three friends were included in these analyses.

*Obligation to Obey Parental Rules.* Adolescents' beliefs about parental authority was assessed by asking adolescents if they thought they had to obey rules made by parents. The scale, a modification of Smetana's (1988) interview, consisted of 26 different issues, including four different kinds of issues that parents may want to make rules about: personal, prudential, multifaceted and friendship issues. The items were regarding, for example, parents' right to set rules about what they do after school, who their friends are, and how they spend their money. For each issue adolescent indicated whether or not they were obliged to obey rules they disagreed with. The number of items students disagreed with was summed.

#### Results

The regression analyses results indicated that parental monitoring, adolescents' beliefs about parental authority and peers' problem behaviors were predictors of adolescents' problem behavior involvement.

#### (1) Does parental monitoring undermine the influence of delinquent peers on adolescent problem behavior?

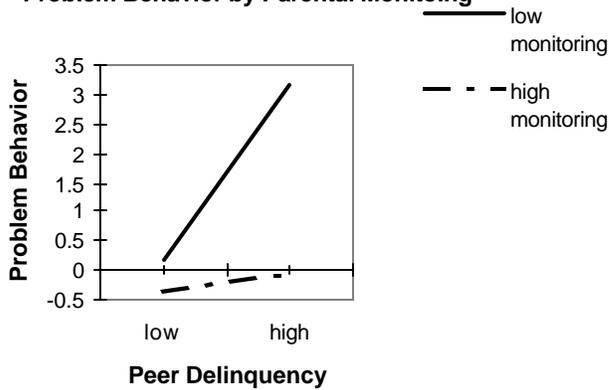
**Yes.** Adolescents with parents who are highly involved in monitoring their children are less influenced by delinquent peers to be involved in problem behavior ( $p < .001$ ).

Table 1. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Problem Behaviors

Predictor	B
Monitoring	-.281***
Peer Problem	.222***
Obedience	-.301***
Monitoring x Peer Problem	-.138***
Model R <sup>2</sup>	.480

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Relationship Between Peer Delinquency and Problem Behavior by Parental Monitoring**



**(2) Is legitimacy of parental authority more important when adolescents are not monitored effectively?**

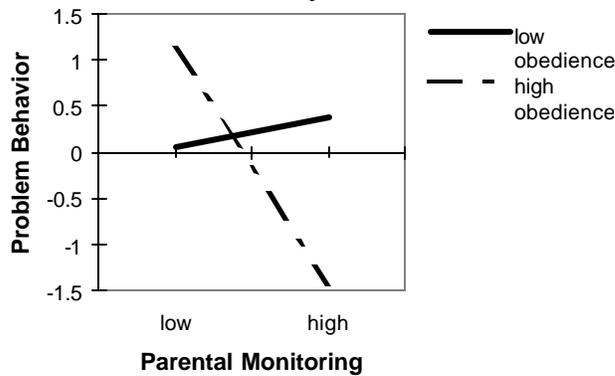
**Yes.** Parental monitoring is most effective in keeping adolescents from being involved in problem behavior when adolescents do not believe that they must obey parental rules ( $p < .001$ ). In other words, monitoring is only effective in the face of *risk* - in this case, when adolescents are less willing to be socialized.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Problem Behaviors

Predictor	B
Monitoring	-.217***
Peer Problem	.260***
Obedience	-.291***
Obedience x Monitoring	.212***
Model R <sup>2</sup>	.499

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Relationship Between Parental Monitoring and Problem Behavior by Obedience**



**(3) Are delinquent peers less influential when adolescents believe that they are obliged to obey parents' rules?**

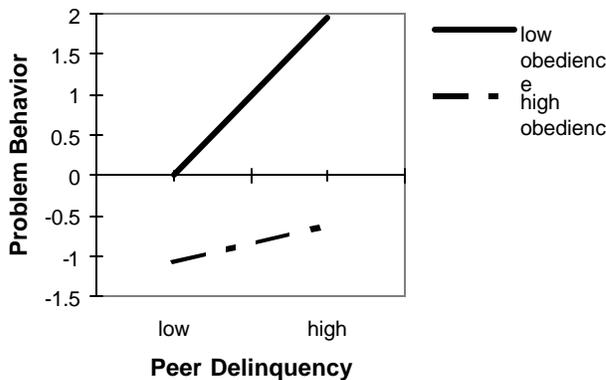
**Yes.** Adolescents who feel obliged to obey parental rules are less vulnerable to negative influence of delinquent peers ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Problem Behaviors

Predictor	B
Monitoring	-.308***
Peer Problem	.227***
Obedience	-.290***
Obedience x Peer Problem	-.118**
Model R <sup>2</sup>	.468

\*\*  $p < .01$     \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Relationship Between Peer Delinquency and Problem Behavior by Obedience**



**Conclusions**

As we found out, the influence of delinquent peers on adolescent problem behavior involvement is buffered by parental monitoring on adolescents. However, during adolescence, with the increased time spent independently from parents, parental monitoring buffers adolescents from harm when they are less willing to obey the parents' rules. In addition, negative effects of having delinquent friends on adolescent problem behaviors could be buffered if adolescents believe that they are obliged to obey parents. Adolescents who believe that they are obligated to obey parental authority are less likely to be involved in problem behaviors because that beliefs buffers them from ineffective parental monitoring and undermines delinquent peer influence.

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