

Behavioral Intervention Strategies in Antisocial and Aggressive Children: A Literature Review

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### Introduction

Children who experience early maltreatment may be subject to disruptions in emotional development (Young & Widom 2014), resulting in antisocial behaviors. Antisocial behavior is characterized by a lack of empathy and social sensitivity, and seemingly violates social rules or norms. This behavior can also be described as manipulative or defiant (Farrington 2005). Because antisocial behavior often results in aggression toward others (Jurado et al., 2017), this behavior in children and adolescents can escalate into behavioral problems including criminal activity and violent offenses. Research on the effects of child abuse on juvenile delinquency have shown that children who have experienced early violence and abuse are more likely to show problem behaviors than children who have not had these adverse experiences (Widom & Maxfield 2001).

Behavior interventions for antisocial behavior in children are of great importance, as social and behavioral development is at its height during the first five years of life, as children are most dependent on their parents during this time (Prather & Golden 2009). The origins of antisocial behavior are a focus in studying and developing behavioral interventions. In order to best treat antisocial behavior, we must first understand it. Long standing hypotheses regarding the development of antisocial behavior focus on parental relationships and the family environment. Walter Prather and Jeannie Golden discuss a behavioral treatise in the treatment of antisocial behaviors as a result of abuse in their 2009 publication, *Learning and Thinking: A Behavioral Treatise on Abuse and Antisocial Behavior in Young Criminal Offenders*. The model developed recognizes inconsistent parenting practices, neglect or abuse, and family dynamics as

being predictors of antisocial behaviors, both in childhood and adulthood. It is important, then, to incorporate social learning theory as an important factor in antisocial behaviors, as reinforcement and modeling are proposed by Golden and Prather as preeminent in the development of problem behaviors.

Neglect has many definitions, however Golden and Prather choose to define it as inadequate care, both emotional and physical. Because this definition is broad, it encompasses a continuum of neglect. Abuse is defined in the paper as purposeful physical and psychological injury by a parent or caretaker. These factors combined with the family structure are contributors to antisocial behaviors. Previous research has failed to prioritize the impact of the family structure on antisocial behavior, thus effective treatments are limited.

### **The Parent-Child Relationship**

The quality of parent relationships is the focus of the treatise presented by Golden and Prather, as they suggest that abuse and neglect can be predicted by the nature of the family. Correlations between adolescent criminality and abusive-parenting practices are apparent in the research, thus the motivation to examine and target the quality and nature of the parent-child relationship. If these relationships are weak or harmful, Prather and Golden hypothesize that the likelihood of antisocial and criminal behaviors escalates. An important theory Prather and Golden choose to consider is social learning theory. Social learning theory, first proposed by Albert Bandura in the 1970s, posits that learning occurs through modeling and imitation (Bandura and Walters 1977). Aggression can be learned through observing a parent's or caretaker's violent behavior.

Prather and Golden also discuss attachment theories and alternative therapeutic approaches in another 2009 paper, *A Behavioral Perspective of Childhood Trauma and Attachment Issues: Toward Alternative Treatment Approaches for Children with a History of Abuse*. In this literature, they provide that inadequate learning can lead to attachment issues, which can further escalate into mistrust of others and abnormal moral development. The apparent “lack of emotion” portrayed in antisocial individuals may in fact be abnormal emotional development caused by the history of reinforcement and motivating operations. Parents are the child’s first source of safety, and if this safety net is broken, the parent-child attachment can be disrupted (Schofield & Beck 2005). If the parent-child relationship involves harsh disciplinary behaviors, the child may begin to feel a lack of safety from their caretakers, which can lead to aggressive behaviors (Prather & Golden 2009).

For children who were maltreated, but are removed from the abusive environment, their view of caregivers, even those who are caring and loving, is tainted by fear. Forming close relationships is a problem for these children, as they are less able to develop positive emotions (Young & Widom 2014). Because the parent is viewed as a threatening stimulus, the child may become manipulative in order to gain control over caregivers (Prather & Golden 2009).

Golden and Prather examine the importance of the internal workings of the family dynamic in the treatise which sets forth both risk and protective factors for the development of violent behaviors. Affection and consistency are among the most important factors in a child’s development, thus neglect and abuse are notable risk factors when considering antisocial behaviors and aggression (Loeber & Farrington 1998).

### **Treatment Approaches**

Prather and Golden offer a possible treatment direction in each of the two studies presented. Both of these avenues follow ABA theories of behavior change through reinforcement and stimulus-response contingencies. Amidst the development of Social Learning theory, Albert Bandura theorized that behavior change required a stimulus change in order to modify the behavior once regulated by those stimuli (Bandura 1969). The environment can be responsible for regulating the behavior of the child, thus in order to stop antisocial behaviors, the environmental factors must be changed, and these factors may include parent behaviors and family dynamics.

### **In-Home Parent Training**

The treatment proposed by Prather and Golden in the treatise, *Learning and Thinking* (2009), is in-home parent training. This has proven to be an effective treatment in preventing delinquency and antisocial behaviors in the child. It is essential to identify and define the problem behaviors in order to best target and treat the issue. This training should focus on parents as the discriminative stimulus for the child's behavior. Positive and negative reinforcement is paramount in modifying behavior, therefore, because the parent is the discriminative stimulus for the child's behavior, socially significant behaviors for the child must be reinforced through the parents. This relies on adequate behavior modeling by the parent, consistency of reinforcement, punishing unwanted behaviors while reinforcing the correct ones, and identifying stimuli which contribute or are related to aggressive or antisocial behaviors (Prather and Golden 2009).

### **Insecure Attachment and Behavior**

In the second study by Prather and Golden, the behavioral perspective focuses on the emotional regulation patterns of the child as a result of their upbringing. Overreaction to others is a common behavior among children who have previously experienced neglect or abuse, thus, with these adolescents, especially those at risk of criminal offending, treatment should be directed at the stimulus-response patterns that will promote healthy emotion regulation (Prather & Golden 2009).

Attachment theory has important implications in this realm of behavior research. The Bowlby-Ainsworth Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of early relationships between children, parents, and people around them (Bowlby & Ainsworth 1979). In Bowlby's theory, he posits that attachment is a biological and behavioral response which allows individuals to seek and obtain basic human needs. Insecurely attached children are predicted to have worse outcomes later on, as compared to children with secure attachment to caregivers (Flaherty & Sadler 2010). The mother's consistency and sensitivity to the child is a predictor of the child's trust and confidence later in life. This attachment provides the foundation for the child's ability to communicate, express, and regulate emotions (Flaherty & Sadler 2010).

Prather and Golden's Behavioral Perspective study outlines attachment styles in foster children who were previously maltreated as having illformed attachment styles. These attachment issues create inappropriate behavior patterns due to the learned reinforcement contingencies in the child's early environment. Because social interaction is the key factor in reinforcing behavior, the environment is a critical component in the development of treatment approaches.

For treating attachment disorders, attachment therapies often fail to provide positive outcomes and lack substantial evidence regarding their effectiveness because of no common definition of the issue (Prather & Golden 2009). The behaviors associated with attachment disorders and trauma are complicated and make standard therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy difficult to conduct.

As with their treatment treatise on young criminal offenders, Prather and Golden again present a direction of treatment which combines cognitive therapies with principles of behavior analysis. Both of the studies presented follow behavior guidelines for examining and modifying the family environment. Their approach rests on the premise that learning and thinking directly influences behavior through experiences, and behavior change is the primary focus of the treatment.

Through a behavioral perspective, the treatment approach presented examines insecure attachments learned through abuse and trauma. The behaviors associated with this learned attachment style are trust, or rather mistrust, and moral behaviors. The literature often portrays certain antisocial behaviors in maltreated children as lacking adequate emotional development. However, Prather and Golden choose to define the behaviors as a failure to express emotions due to the discriminative stimuli (Sd's) and motivating operations (MO's) in the child's learning history and current environment.

Maltreated children do not trust their caregiver due to the history of their abusive parents, therefore, when the child does something undesirable, they do not fear the consequences from their caregivers as most children do, because they do not believe the caregiver is truthful or has a genuine interest in them. For unattached children, the punishment that comes with "bad"

behavior may be generalized to previous experiences with abuse, whereas attached children associate the punishment with disappointment or morally wrong. Past events of maltreatment, abuse, or neglect become an Sd for all anger from caregivers (Prather & Golden 2009).

Modifying the Sd's is crucial in treating these children.

### **The RCEBT Approach**

Reinforcement contingencies maintain behaviors, and according to Prather and Golden, these contingencies are important in helping the child unlearn problem behavior patterns and relearn the correct ones. A specific form of therapy which can be effective in this relearning is rational cognitive emotive behavior therapy (RCEBT), which focuses on behavior, cognition, emotion, and the environment as interacting variables in the child's development. In the behavioral treatise first presented, the treatment approach to aggressive and antisocial children was similar in that reinforcement contingencies and environmental factors were the focus. However, in their Behavioral Perspective study, RCEBT provides a more structured and well-defined approach to treatment, especially for those antisocial children who are no longer living in the abusive environment, but are not with adoptive or foster parents.

According to Prather and Golden, RCEBT follows a protocol of short therapy sessions, and views maltreated children as readily changeable, as their behaviors are not pathological, but rather learned and taught. Additionally, just as Prather and Golden described in the Treatise, parental training is also paramount, as they posit that abused children are primarily shaped by how the parents respond to their behavior. This becomes a key part of the RCEBT and once again emphasizes learning and behavior rather than pathologies.



This treatment approach differs from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in that RCEBT focuses on using establishing and motivating operations to allow for healthy parental relationships to act as reinforcement for the child to overcome the controlling conditions which regulate their behavior.

Patterns of thinking affects behavior, thus this therapy helps children understand the importance of changing their thinking and behavior. Understanding the significance of their behavior and thinking, and realizing the relationship between the two, allows them to learn better self control (Prather & Golden 2009). In turn, this also allows the therapist to identify the antecedent conditions which maintain the emotional and behavior problems.

The RCEBT approach proposed by Prather and Golden is a 10-step process. The steps are defined clearly in the study:

“1) determining and normalizing thinking and behaving, 2) evaluating language, 3) shifting attention away from problem talk 4) describing times when the attachment problem isn’t happening, 5) focusing on how family members “successfully” solve problematic attachment behavior; 6) acknowledging “unpleasant emotions” (i.e., angry, sad, scared) underlying negative interactional patterns, 7) identifying antecedents (controlling conditions) and associated negative cognitive emotive connections in behavior (reciprocal role of thought and emotion in behavioral causation), 8) encouraging previously abused children to experience or “own” negative thoughts and associated aversive emotional feelings, 9) modeling and rewarding positive behavior change (with themselves and in relationships), and 10) encouraging and rewarding thinking and behaving differently,” (Prather & Golden 2009, p. 65).

This treatment approach emphasizes the causal relationship of early childhood experiences and trauma-induced thought patterns, and behavior and emotion. Through individual tasks that make up for or override a history of negative experiences, it is assumed that altering the cognitive-emotive relationship will lead to substantial improvement in behavior.

The goal is not to change the effects of trauma or improve attachment itself. Alternatively, the focus is on the social determinants which maintain the problem behaviors, and improving interpersonal skills to allow the child an understanding of how to control their emotions and behavior. This is done through the use of establishing operations (EO) or motivating operations (MO). This therapy aims to alter the EO's and MO's which lead to emotional dysregulation. EO's can alter reinforcement or punishment effects of certain stimuli. In maltreated children, positive emotional interactions are EO's that can lead a child who has been without consistent love and security to be reinforced by the emotional availability of the parents. The accessibility to the parents emotions can be reinforcing to the child's own positive emotions and can promote feelings of attachment.

Consistent with Prather and Golden's study first discussed, treatment involves the entire family, as this is where behavior change begins. The parents and the child must focus on the behaviors that are presently effective within the family, as well as the thoughts that lead to the behaviors that need improvement. Rather than fixating on the emotional deficiencies of the child and the problems associated with them, positive emotions and positive interactions should be of greater importance when discussing behavior change with the parents and child. The stimulus-response pattern is the foremost important factor in treatment for antisocial, previously

maltreated children because healthy patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving must be reestablished in the child's environment.

Prather and Golden also suggest the importance of reinforcing children for feeling their emotions rather than avoiding them. Through reinforcement schedules and modeling, children can also be taught to externalize their negative emotions properly. Finally, coping skills can be implemented through therapeutic strategies. These assumptions are based on the similarities between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and attachment problems in maltreated children. Considering these similarities are important when developing the RCEBT approach.

### **Implications**

Treatment of neglected and abused children is of great importance at the individual and societal levels. Children who portray antisocial behavior are not "too far gone". However, if these children fall under the radar of treatment, their likelihood of criminal offending is higher. Not only can treatment of antisocial behaviors prevent juvenile delinquency, it can offer the individual better emotional and behavioral control, while increasing self-esteem in society. The RCEBT approach, as well as the in-home parent training offered by Prather and Golden in their 2009 papers are two avenues which use effective ABA techniques. The approaches probe further analysis into treatment development plans for antisocial children with aggressive tendencies and attachment issues using behavioral methods.

There is a need for additional research on treatments for antisocial and aggressive behavior in children with a history of maltreatment. There are two viewpoints which Prather and Golden argue are crucial to understanding the behaviors of these children. The first is the importance of behaving and thinking differently in order to divert thoughts away from negative

emotions. The second is the correction of learning history which has led to maladaptive behaviors. Each of these directions demands substantial inquiry if we are to assess the effectiveness of possible treatment approaches.

The parent-child relationship is paramount, especially for adoptive or foster families in order to promote a caring and secure environment for children who had previously been exposed to adverse environments. The quality of the family relationship can compete with maladaptive behavior by reestablishing stimulus-response patterns which maintain the behavior. By doing so, emotions which originate from attachment problems can be recognized and targeted.

Avenues for research in this area are endless and necessary for the well-being of families, children, and future generations. The field of Applied Behavior Analysis can provide an effective and practical step towards treatment for the individuals in need.

### **References and Abstracts**

Prather, W., Golden, J. 2009. A Behavioral Perspective of Childhood Trauma and Attachment

Issues: Toward Alternative Treatment Approaches for Children with a History of Abuse.

*International Journal of Behavioral and Consultation Therapy*. [https://doi.org/10.1037/](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0100872)

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### Abstract

Attachment theory provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding trauma and the treatment of children who have been abused. This article examines childhood trauma and attachment issues from the perspective of behavior analysis, and provides a theoretical basis for two alternative treatment models for previously abused children and their foster or adoptive parents: rational cognitive emotive behavioral therapy and trauma-based psychotherapy. These new treatment approaches are based on the integration of attachment theory and basic concepts and principles of rational thought and behavior analysis. These therapeutic models provide dyadic, cognitive, and emotive interventions that encourage behavior change with foster or adopted children who have been abused or neglected as part of their early experiences. The role of emotion in behavioral causation and the teaching and learning of different behavior are central to the treatment process, just as they are central features in healthy parent child relationships. Conclusions are reached that “familial and therapeutic environments” in which perception and previous learning guide parent-child interaction are more important than diagnostic orientation, and implications for specific cognitive and behavioral interventions are suggested.

Prather, W., Golden, J. 2009. Learning and Thinking: A Behavioral Treatise on Abuse and

Antisocial Behavior in Young Criminal Offenders. *International Journal of Behavioral and Consultation Therapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0100873>

### Abstract

Social learning theory provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding abuse and the teaching and learning of antisocial or criminal behavior in young offenders. This article examines social learning theory and the quality of parent-child relationships from the perspective

of behavioral analysis, and provides a rationale for a comprehensive behavioral treatment approach for young offenders and their parents. A theoretical model has been developed to provide the social context to examine how abuse and neglect, inconsistent or erratic parenting practices, family structure, and abusive disciplinary methods, can be integrated to predict juvenile delinquency. The purpose of this model is to examine the major environmental determinants that impact the quality of parent-child relationships and associated antisocial behavior in children, and the relevant but implicit behavioral principles operating in the home. Questions are raised which suggest that typical or mainstream juvenile detention programs compete with the acquisition of new functional skills, and provide an environment for learned dysfunctional habits that are then reinforced and maintained in treatment programs that continue to model or promote criminal behavior. Conclusions are reached that learning and reinforcement history have a greater impact on the quality of parent-child relationships than family structure, and provide a theoretical rationale for analyzing and developing effective interventions for a problem of social importance.

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