Learning Disabilities, Juvenile Delinquency and the Family: The Role of “Intensive Parenting”

Michelle Pryor-Kowalski *

Bowling Green State University

* Please address correspondence to Dr. Michelle Pryor-Kowalski, Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, 212 Williams Hall, Bowling Green, OH 43403. E-mail: mkowals@bgsu.edu.

Abstract

This study explores the ways in which parents cope with and manage children who have problems such as learning disabilities and delinquency. Prior research has suggested that these problem areas are frequently related, but this qualitative study explores variations in parenting dynamics associated with better adaptations on the part of the child, and that lower the likelihood that the learning disabled child will also emerge as a delinquent one. In fourteen of these families, the child had a learning disability and had also become involved in delinquent behavior. We argue that although all parents who have a learning disabled child share a number of common experiences, including unique family stresses, differences in parenting style and practices, including accommodations/reactions to the learning disability serve to differentiate more successful families from those whose children eventually become involved with the juvenile court system. A highly intensive parenting style in particular characterizes these more successful families.

Keywords: learning disability, delinquency, social bonding, parenting

Many scholars have examined the possible link and prevalence between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency (Brier, 1989; Broder, Dunivant, Smith, & Sutton, 1981; Malmgren, Abbott, & Hawkins 1999; McNamara & Willoby, 2010; Morris & Morris, 2006; Oshima, Huang, Jonson-Reid, Drake, 2010; Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, Poirier, 2005), but questions regarding the nature of this relationship still remain. This research tradition however, has generated several main hypotheses to account for the higher incidence of delinquency among individuals with learning disabilities. Most discussion of causal linkages emphasizes school failure, differential treatment, or the susceptibility hypothesis (Dunivant, 1982; Larson, 1988; Smith, 1998).

While these hypotheses focus on a variety of factors and causal linkages, one domain of influence that has been neglected is that of the family. Parents may be frustrated by their child's disability and all that it entails, or they may be

frustrated by the child's inability to do well in school. The family may facilitate getting him/her the help to achieve various developmental tasks, as well as act as advocate for their child both academically and socially. These and other parental tasks and reactions can influence the socialization practices in the family. Despite the likely influence of the family, little research has explored the family impact and the role parenting processes play in the learning disability-juvenile delinquency connection.

In 1976, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention began an investigation of the possibility of a learning disability-juvenile-delinquency link. This marked the beginning of an increased period of research on the topic, as well as proposed explanations for the possible link. Although it would appear that a link exists, it is unclear whether the link is causal or, alternatively, spurious, if juvenile delinquency and learning disabilities both have common factors. Malmgren, Abbott and Hawkins (1999) suggest that it may be too early to postulate an explanatory theory that there is a direct link, and suggest, instead, a continuation of exploratory research on the link itself.

According to federal government figures, public schools in America have identified over 6 million children, ages 3 to 21 years of age, being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B, in 2009-2010 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Of these individuals it has been found that young individuals with learning disabilities are more likely than individuals without disabilities to engage in delinquent behavior (Brier, 1989; Larson, 1988; McNamara & Willoughby, 2010; Oshima & Jonson-Reid, 2010; Pickar & Tori 1986). Individuals with disabilities are also disproportionately represented in juvenile detention facilities and correctional facilities (Morris & Morris, 2006; Shandra & Hogan, 2012).

Theories detailing the causes of juvenile delinquency are widespread and focus on many biological, psychological, and sociological variables. Criminological theories of delinquency under sociology emphasize variables including race, class, and gender. However, these theories overlook individual characteristics such as learning disabilities.

Juvenile delinquents and students with learning disabilities possess many of the same characteristics. Poor academic achievement, short attention spans, impulse control problems, and lack of motivation are characteristics associated with both learning disability and delinquency. Other shared characteristics include negative self concepts, low frustration tolerance, greater prevalence of males than females, poor academic problem solving, and weak social skills (Gallico, Burns, & Grob, 1988; Smith, 1998; Winters 1997; White, Moffitt, Earls, Robins & Silva, 1990). Researchers have used three main hypotheses to establish a connection between individuals with learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency.

The School Failure Hypothesis

The school failure hypothesis argues social rejection following poor academic achievement breaks down self confidence to the point that, if given proper psychological and environmental incentives, a child may engage in delinquent

behavior (Smith, 1998). Supportive arguments for the school failure hypothesis come from clinical observations, tests of academic skills, and school records. Studies consistently report that school failure and dropping out are strong and persistent correlates of self-reported school misbehavior and official delinquency (Jarjoura, 1993), and it has been shown that youth with learning disabilities have higher rates of dropping out and risk of dropping out of school than their non-learning disabled counterparts (Deshler et al., 2001; Levin, Zigmond, & Birch, 1985). Keilitz, Zaremba and Broder (1979) report that school failure of youth with learning disabilities has also been found to be related to delinquency. Finally, academic difficulties and school failure in general have been shown to precede delinquency (Marquin & Loeber, 1996; Meltzer, Roditi, & Fenton, 1986) and antisocial behavior (Barone, Weissburg, Kasprow, & Voyce, 1995).

In general, students with learning disabilities report poorer bonds with school and a greater dissatisfaction with teachers. For these reasons learning disabled youth may not be experiencing the social and relational contexts of schools in the same way as their non-learning disabled peers. School bonding, in general, helps prevent delinquency and reflects ideas about social control and conformity highlighted by social control theorists. Specifically, the lack of attachment to teachers and weak commitment to education can lead to school failure and subsequently to delinquency (Empey, 1982; Hirschi, 1969; Rosenbaum & Lasley, 1990). More recently, Jenkins (1997) found the school's social bond to be a crucial intervening mechanism that can explain effects of certain variables on school misconduct, truancy and crime in middle school. The association between school bonding and delinquency holds true for both whites and African Americans (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992).

The Differential Treatment Hypothesis

The differential treatment hypothesis proposes that individuals with learning disabilities and/or hyperactivity are arrested or brought before juvenile judges more frequently than are their non-learning disabled peers. According to the differential treatment position, youths with learning disabilities and their non-handicapped peers engage in comparable amounts of delinquent behaviors. Police, other officials, and social workers often treat youth with learning disabilities differently, however, which increases their incidence of arrest and adjudication (Broder, Dunivant, Smith, & Sutton, 1981; Zimmerman, Keilitz, & Broder, 1981). Dunivant (1982) found that youths with learning disabilities were considerably more likely to be arrested and adjudicated than their non-learning disabled counterparts. Murray (1976) also states that youth with learning disabilities are more likely to be picked up by police than their non-learning disabled counterparts. They may also be caught more frequently if they lack the abilities to plan strategies to avoid being detected.

Two explanations have been proposed for different treatment in the system. Youths with learning disabilities may lack the necessary strategies to avoid detection or apprehension when encountering the law, and may also fail to understand legal proceedings (Dunivant, 1982; Pearl & Bryan, 1994). Youths who have language-based learning disabilities have been shown to lack

sophistication in knowing when, how, and with whom to talk (Dudley-Marling, 1985). Broder, Dunivant, Smith and Sutton (1981) found support for this hypothesis, noting that there was a significant relationship between learning disabilities and the probability of adjudication.

The Susceptibility Hypothesis

The third major theory offered as an explanation for the link between learning disabilities and delinquency is the susceptibility hypothesis. This hypothesis contends that learning disabilities are often accompanied by “a variety of socially troublesome personality characteristics” (Murray, 1976, p.26). These characteristics can be neurological, intellectual, or both, and may contribute directly to antisocial behavior.

Because of the differences in perceptiveness, poor learning from experience, and impulsive behaviors, messages from authority figures such as parents, teachers and police officials may not be understood in the manner intended. Factors which may deter a non-learning disabled student from delinquent acts may not have the same effect on learning disabled students, thus increasing their susceptibility to engaging in delinquent behaviors (Smith, 1998).

“Bringing in the Family”

Erikson (1984) stated that a securely attached child is one that approaches life in a framework of trust. As a parent, promoting this trust requires hard work and perhaps an extra effort, especially in the formative years. Hirschi’s (1969) Social Bonding Theory is one theory that specifically incorporates family processes into the explanation for troublesome behavior. This theory focuses on the ways in which the family functions as an agent of social control. Through bonds that develop in the family as well as society, the individual is deterred from crime and delinquency. The first element of this bonding process is attachment. This attachment is a general sense of belonging and regard for other people or objects. It is a close, emotional bond in which learning occurs. It is through this attachment that the internalization of norms and a conscience are developed. Hirschi (1969) states, “The essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or superego thus lies in the attachment of the individual to others” (p. 18). If we are attached to people, we are less likely to commit crimes against them or the greater society. This attachment is both psychological and emotional in nature and is the connection the parent and child feel toward each other and the extent that they care about one another’s opinions and feelings. The attachment element of the bond helps prevent the child’s involvement in delinquent activities through communication between parent and child and a general sense of well being that is shared.

The four elements of the bonds--attachment, commitment, involvement and belief that develop within the family system work to provide the children in the family with a good foundation. Families play a vital role in terms of teaching, communicating, supervising and controlling, in the prevention of delinquent behaviors. Communication is essential in the relationship between parent and child. Hirschi (1969, p. 108) suggests:

If the child does not communicate with his parents, if he does not tell them of his activities, then he does not have to concern himself with their imagined reactions to his behavior. If, by the same token, they do not tell him how they feel about his behavior, this too frees him from an important source of potential concern.

This communication along with supervision by parents, sharing of family activities, and awareness that his/her parents care all work as controls against delinquency.

Parenting the Student with Learning Disabilities

The goal of most parents is to help their children develop into moral, competent adults who will be able to enter society and be self-sufficient. Thus, parenting is usually accomplished with two objectives in mind: socializing the child into both the familial group and the larger society (Gecas, 1981). Parenting “styles” have been given much consideration in the family literature and have often been divided into three main typologies. Authoritarian parents seek to control children through strict rules and an expectation of obedience. Permissive parents often overindulge children, make few demands, and enforce little punishment for rule breaking. The third style of parenting, authoritative style, is often associated with the most positive outcomes. This type of parent is both demanding and responsive, yet flexible. The authoritative parent sets rules and enforces them, but also explains the reasons and encourages open discussion. It has been found that this type of parenting produces children with the highest self-esteem, self-reliance, and social competence (Baumrind, 1996; Coopersmith, 1967).

Children of authoritative parents have been found to score better than children of parents of other styles on measures of attachment (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003), adjustment (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, & Mounts, 1994), school achievement (Boon, 2007), and social and school competence (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Prosocial behavior has also been found to be better with authoritative parenting (Hastings, McShane, & Parker, 2007).

Stress on Families with Children with Learning Disabilities

Perhaps the time of greatest difficulty for the parents of a child with a learning disability is when it is initially diagnosed. In most cases it has been found that the initial reaction of the parents is shock and negativity, often resembling the reactions to death and bereavement (Blacher, 1984; Marvin & Pianta, 1996). After the initial diagnosis, a family will either adapt to the disability with a degree of flexibility or pursue effective action, or become immobilized from more ineffective actions. Some families do not react in either of these ways and instead engage in denial that the disability exists (Falik, 1995).

As is the case of any family with a child with special needs, including a learning disability, the child is found to encounter more stress because of the special need. This special need requires more attention than is given in families where children are developing normally (Boyce & Barnett, 1991; Innocenti, Huh, & Boyce, 1992). The family is forced to make great changes in order to

accommodate the disability. How families adapt to children with learning disabilities is complex. Some parents perceive themselves as always occupied (Turnbull & Ruef, 1996). These life and routine changes have been found to have significant effects on the family functioning (Marvin & Pianta, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990).

Margalit and Heiman (1986) found that difficulties for parents with children that are disabled include difficult family relationships with lower coherence, less emphasis on the personal growth of the other family members and an emphasis on control within the family. Parents of disabled children experience a plethora of extra problems including higher stress, greater parental depression, more feelings of restriction, and more health problems than parents of non-disabled children (Quine & Paul, 1985; Roach, Ormond & Barratt, 1999). Financial burden, a pessimistic view of the future, family conflict, and the perception of negative public reactions have also been found (Qureshi, 1990). Also for mothers of children with learning disabilities and problem behaviors, social isolation, conflict, limitation of lifestyle and self-blame were evident (Johnson, O'Reilly, & Vostanis, 2006).

The traditional approaches to parenting do not always work with a learning disabled individual. This makes the parental role much more challenging. Stevens (1996) argues that it is the role of parents of children with learning disabilities to create solutions to help their children succeed. These solutions, because they are relatively non-traditional and lack codification, are often perceived as very challenging and stressful to the parents who often devise their own adaptations on a trial and error basis.

Life in the home of a child with learning disabilities has also been found to be more chaotic and disorganized. This may be related directly to the difficulties of having a child with learning disabilities or because the child with the disability is adding to problems that may have already been in existence within the family (Osman, 1979). Prior research focused on the families' abilities to cope with stress found that a higher chance of successful coping when parents feel more in control over their circumstances, or when the stressors are anticipated and not unexpected (Paulus, Nagar, Larey, & Camacho, 1996). The diagnosis of a learning disability is neither anticipated nor expected in most cases, however.

This qualitative study explores the ways in which parents cope with and manage children who have problems such as learning disabilities and delinquency. In depth interviews with parents allows us to explore variations in parenting dynamics, adaptations on the part of the parent and child, and the likelihood that the child with a learning disability will also emerge as a delinquent. Although all parents who have a child with a learning disability share a number of common experiences, including unique family stresses, differences in parenting styles and practices, including accommodations/reactions to the learning disability, this study serves to differentiate issues of families with learning disabilities and no delinquency from those whose learning disabled children eventually become involved with the juvenile court system. By interviewing families with children who are learning disabled and delinquent, as well as those with non-delinquent children with learning disabilities, important

themes, patterns, relationships, stressors, and parenting strategies employed by the families of delinquent and non-delinquent children are identified. The focus on parenting practices, stressors, communication, and other family dynamics may provide useful information for parents as well as educational and juvenile court systems. In addition, the focus on the family suggests a more nuanced understanding of the social mechanisms that may intervene, making the association between learning disabilities and delinquency less inevitable.

Although the child's problems with school and individual challenges may make delinquency more likely, the family has a key role in framing and influencing experiences both in school and out of school that may impact the child's social development and sense of self. Families have a central role in the life of any child, whether learning disabled or non-learning disabled. However, the interviews conducted with the families of children with learning disabilities focus directly on experiences and variations in parenting that relate directly to the child's status as a child with a learning disability.

Methods

Sample

The subjects for this study, all residents of Northwest and Central Ohio, were identified through various public school districts with enrollment between 1,000 and 4,500 students with the help of the special education coordinator or superintendent at five schools. Access to subjects was gained by submitting a proposal to the various school districts. All schools had comparable resources for dealing with learning disabilities according to size and need. Human subject's approval was granted through Bowling Green State University.

For optimal data collection and to obtain a diverse sample, subjects were chosen randomly from a series of names obtained from the special education coordinators. The special education coordinators or school representatives contacted eligible families by phone or in a written letter to solicit their participation in the research project. The subjects were all families with children formally diagnosed by school officials with learning disabilities. The sample included families with both male and female children. This allowed the researcher to explore potential differences that may relate to parenting male in contrast to female children. Thirty families were selected and interviewed in person by the researcher. The location of the interview was chosen by the participant to facilitate his or her comfort. Numbers were assigned to each family for codification. Pseudonyms are used within quotations in the findings section to protect the confidentiality of the subjects.

The sample contained 30 children between the ages of twelve and seventeen years of age. These interviews were conducted primarily with mothers, although two single fathers with custody of their children also participated. Two of the families were African American and the other 28 identified as European American. The disabilities ranged from severely learning disabled, to children with gifted IQ's and a learning disability. All children were on current Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) for their disability. Of the sample of thirty families, sixteen of the families reported no official or unofficial

delinquency by their children. Fourteen of the families reported that their children had been involved in a range of delinquent activities including school suspensions, underage drinking, aggravated menacing and theft. A small number of families reported extensive court intervention. No specific information was collected on socioeconomic status unless parents stated details during the interview.

Data Collection

Detailed in depth interviews were conducted to examine similarities and differences between the families of learning disabled delinquents and non-delinquents. The format of the interview included ten open-ended questions loosely based on social bonding principals described above. The questions and interviews also addressed stress factors associated with the disability itself, as it had influenced internal family dynamics and daily living (See Appendix A). Reactions to and concerns about poor school performance, the amount of time spent on parenting this child, and how the disability caused stress for the family and its members were also included. The focus was on how stress processes might interfere with the development of parent-child bonds but also to differentiate how some parents managed to more successfully direct their child's social, academic and self-development in ways that minimized delinquency as an adaptation.

Findings

The parenting styles developed by the parents in this sample appeared to fall into two categories. Some believed in the flexibility that is part of the authoritative style, and others believed that no special consideration should be given to the learning disabled child. The latter style often resulted from the challenge that parents faced when one child has a learning disability and one does not. Some respondents emphasized that they needed to exhibit a similar parenting style for all children in order to reduce sibling rivalry.

No, I mean I treat them no different than others. You can't give one more than you give the other. That just makes the kids want to fight with each other. (#14)

Joan started running away saying how Eric gets to do this and Eric don't have to do this and Eric don't have to do that...So I started counseling too. We sat down and a caseworker made a list of rules. Both kids have to follow them and it is really hard. No matter how much Eric bugs me now. I can say "No," and stick to "No" now. (#22)

Even when the parents indicated that they had tried to treat each child the same, the non-disabled sibling often expressed resentment of the family's focus on the disability.

There are times when Derek's disabilities make it hard for his sister. She feels that he is getting all of the attention. That there is more concern for her brother than for her. As a 14-year-old this concern often rears its head as anger at everyone. Her natural rebellion creates a chasm between her words and her heart. We hope that as her understanding of her place in the world - not the center! - expands, so will her view of her brother's needs and the attention he gets. (#30)

This tension between family members appears common in homes where a disability is present.

Parenting Modifications

A larger subset of the respondents, however, made it clear that indeed they did utilize different parenting strategies with their non-learning disabled and learning disabled children. These differences came in many forms. One tendency was overcompensation when they felt sorry or guilty about the child's disability.

Johnny would shock the crap out of me so bad I would just let him do whatever he wanted. I felt sorry for him all the time. (#22)

Other parents admitted the child with a learning disability was treated more leniently, particularly in the area of grades.

Yes, I cut him much more slack. (#13)

Yes, the girls would say I treat him differently; I expect my oldest to get good grades where I know he can't get those kinds of grades. (#26)

Yes, because I don't expect her to get A's and B's and C's. If she brings home a D, I am happy with her. (#15)

Oh, I am happy with a "D." Last year a "D" was acceptable. Just passing is all we... at this point anything; even a D- was good. (#29)

In addition to modifications related to grade expectations, other families had more general parenting modifications for their children with learning disabilities.

The only thing I have tried is to get someone else to help her with her homework. She seems to do better with someone else. (#16)

We do tend to have to repeat ourselves to make sure that we don't give him more than one task at a time. He is our hands-on kid. (#9)

You have to be very careful of how you approach them on any subject. (#15)

I never paid my older daughter for grades; she was a straight A student and I didn't believe in doing that. Now I do it with her brother all the time. It's a big deal when he gets a good grade.(#13)

We used a lot of the reward system. Where one can come home and have a 104 on a test the other two struggle, struggle, struggle to get a 62. So we put them in different sections of the house and did flash cards. I think I own stock in flash cards or index cards.(#17)

Thus while some parents of learning disabled children appeared to utilize a variety of parenting modifications and strategies, others did not believe in accommodating them in any way. Parents with children who were non-delinquent and learning disabled appeared to make more modifications and were flexible and creative in their approaches. Parents with children who were delinquent, however, did not report as many modifications. However this difference may result from challenges that stem from the delinquent conduct; for example, harsher rules for the children are sometimes imposed through court sanctions. Parents could also be worried about further delinquent activities and feel a strict and inflexible style meets that need.

Extra Efforts in Parenting

One observed difference in parenting that appeared to be a consistent theme is that all of the children, who were learning disabled, but not involved in juvenile delinquency, appeared to have families where what might be termed "intensive parenting" occurred. One parent provided extra encouragement before dropping the child off at school. She offered this uplifting advice each morning before the child got out of the car.

"Be good today, be happy today, You say it every day, you live it every day." That's in your mind the first thing when you go off to school.(#3)

Others tried to carve out special family time and made increased efforts in parenting in general.

We try to have one night a week that is absolutely family night that means not only dinner together but also games or a movie or something that is only family. No distractions whatsoever. He loves family game night, which we try to slide in there too.(#6)

I try to put more effort into him. Of all of the parenting skills I have had, he has pushed every one of them.(#22)

I've made up my mind I am going to make up my own letter pertaining to my child's IEP's and give it to each teacher because the teacher did not even know he was on a IEP.(#8)

Several of the families agreed that extra parenting was necessary because of the challenges associated with the child's learning disability. It was not always the parent directly doing the extra work rather some parents did what they considered necessary to obtain outside help for their children. This help appeared to be beneficial in making the child more successful in school. For example, many families sought out tutors of various kinds.

Finally, in the fourth grade I decided to have him tutored and I stepped away from it. I told him, "I'm not doing this anymore. You can go to a tutor, you can work on your homework there, and you can work on the other things you need to work on." I said, "If you have questions, I'll help you with it, but I'm going to be Mom. I'm not going to be teacher anymore." That has helped a lot.(#13)

She has been in tutoring for several years consistently. This appears to be necessary for her success. It is time consuming and costly.(#25)

Since she has a tutor now she's doing good. The first year we had her in Sylvan's and her reading improved and her study skills improved and now she is basically independent.(#6)

She has had private tutoring. She has had private testing. She has had the Sylvan Learning Center.(#2)

I have easily spent close to 3,000 dollars on tutoring.(#7)

I paid over 4,000 dollars for him to go and he didn't even finish. He was in his last little grouping of vocabulary... but his school does a very good job with vocabulary books and he has picked up very much on his vocabulary. I have seen it in his sentence structuring and I've talked to his English teacher. Everything has come together because he went to Sylvan. I will do it for the younger one too. I will take out a loan or whatever I have to do but he will go.(#20)

Along with extra tutoring, the parents of the children with learning disabilities who were not delinquent, often expressed a determination to find other gifts that their children possessed. These gifts included a variety of activities, but each required effort on the parent's part to get the child interested and involved, and make him or her feel successful. Athletics was one such gift mentioned by many of the respondents.

He has a gift, which is good, athletics. Oh, if he didn't have that, I don't know...(#13)

Sports. She appears to be a good volleyball and basketball player.(#25)

He does wrestling, baseball and golf.(#11)

He is very good at sports.(#17)

Other kinds of involvement consisted of school activities as well as outside activities that made the children feel particularly successful.

She also loves to play her instrument. She has no problem reading her notes and she feels good about herself. (#25)

He really excels at acting and singing.(#1)

Now she is doing good, except she needs to belong to do good. She was in colorguard with the marching band so she belongs to a group and was motivated.(#7)

He is into FFA at Sentinel. He likes it, it's fun. He is doing electronics and thinks that is really cool.(#17)

She is in FFA and does competitions and public speaking.(#8)

He is also in scouting. He is ranked second class, which is pretty impressive. Considering when they start. He has been in that a couple of years. He went into gifted scouting. He went in a year early. He really enjoys that and the whole family is involved in scouting. Also, he is in martial arts.(#6)

He is very involved in the church.(#5)

These activities are important, not only in building the child's sense of self-worth directly, but in that they allow the parent to offer positive feedback and appraisals to the child and others that may be beneficial to the bonding process and solidify the view of self. It also offered the family opportunities and activities in which to participate and spend time together. These strategies take extra effort, illustrating intensive parenting.

Unrealized Parenting Modifications

The majority of parents recognized during the interviewing process that indeed they did make parenting modifications for the child with a learning disability. This was an interesting development because, at the beginning of the interviews, many parents indicated that they did not make such modifications.

Through the course of questioning, however, parents began to reframe their answers in recognition of how they were indeed modifying their parenting to fit the unique situations and challenges posed by the learning disabled child. Modifications could be conceptualized at the most basic level of simply feeling sorry for the child and consequently trying to overcompensate for the disability, to more complex processes involving attempts to make the child feel a greater sense of success. Some parents identified strategies such as giving money as a reward for positive grades, which was something they currently did not believe in or practice for other children in the home. Several parents lowered grade expectations for the learning disabled child. This came about for two reasons. The first is that they had lowered expectations based on the disability, and second, because the parent felt the child suffered enough for the inability to perform as well as other children and simply wanted to recognize any passing grade as a success.

For many of the children these modifications helped to keep their extracurricular life alive, for had these children been punished the same way for bad grades as their siblings, they may not have been able to attend sports or music or any other positive enrichment provided in their life. This positive enrichment often served to enhance self-esteem, which was needed by many of the children in the sample.

“Intensive Parenting” for the Learning Disabled Non-Delinquent

In homes where the child was non-delinquent a certain amount of extra effort was found. These were homes where parenting practices could be described as “intensive”. One way this was accomplished was by specifically seeking out the child’s potential talent or gift and cultivating it. For the parents this Took effort, and in certain instances, money. This search for a talent or gift came in many forms, such as art, musical performance, athletics, church activities, and after-school endeavors such as Boy Scouts, and Future Farmers of America (FFA).

These families also reported setting up quality family time, and reported more cohesive and positive family relationships. Another major difference the families exhibited was tutoring for their children and an increased interest in helping them to achieve to their potential in the educational setting. Tutoring was often very costly, but appeared to have a positive effect on the child’s overall educational outcomes. These parents also wrote letters to teachers and demanded that standards be met for their child’s educational needs. In families where the child was engaged in delinquent activities, none of these sorts of “intensive parenting” efforts were mentioned. These are efforts that are consistent with facilitating the bonds described in social bonding theory (Hirschi, 1969).

Parenting in the homes where delinquency was present took on two distinct themes. Many of the parents had given up and allowed either nobody to parent their children or they allowed the court authorities to take their place in terms of setting and defining rules and regulations in the home. The parents who remained active in parenting were less flexible and used a less involved method of parenting. The “intensive-parenting” aspect seemed to be nonexistent in the

homes where children were delinquent. These parents did not pursue tutoring for their children, look for a special talent or gift to enhance their child's feelings of self-esteem, or try to redirect delinquent activities into more non delinquent ones.

For my sons, I am their mother. I mean, I don't know, the relationship, it's not close. It's not as close as I thought it would be because I guess I'm just so tired and worn out, and I can't wait until the day they are actually out of my house. I think if they were out of my house and on their own our relationship would be better. I feel like I am on them all of the time because I need to be on them all of the time. When they do something good I am totally ecstatic and surprised and I tell them that. But when they take two steps forward they fall four steps behind. I don't know what causes them to do that. (#18)

Relationships in the homes of delinquent children were much more strained and appeared to have less communication between parent and child. Family activities were mentioned less often, and arguing and fighting appeared to be more common. Parents mentioned a lack of support from spouses or significant others and some were on their own in raising their children. Whether these family situations developed before or after the child's delinquency is unclear in the data.

Discussion

Managing a family within the context of a learning disability was at times stressful, frustrating, and often uncertain. This uncertainty came from concerns about both the learning disability itself, and the child's future. This may be said about all parents and their children, but the complexities of raising a child with even a mild learning disability appear to extend beyond the expectations and demands of average parenting. Parents in this study reported additional stress in the home due to the learning disability, and this is consistent with existing literature (Dyson, 1996; Green, 1992; Johnson, O'Reilly, & Vostanis, 2006; Konstantares & Homatidas, 1989; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). These findings, however, add to prior work by eliciting the perspectives of individuals actually experiencing the daily stress of parenting a child with a learning disability. Although for purposes of this study, "intensive" personified the type of parenting exhibited in these families, this is not to say that this cannot be linked to the styles of parenting, specifically authoritative which is the responsive type of parenting, identified in the literature for many years.

Although the idea of added stress is intuitive, it is important to define the sources and nature of this stress in more detail. The families interviewed gave their personal accounts of the stress and its specific causes from their own points of view. For many it was the constant challenge that academics brought for their children. Although many of the children in the sample were academically successful, good grades came at a high price. This cost was both monetary and temporal. Amounts of money spent on tutoring were staggering in many cases. Many parents would be financially unable to pay for the amount of services

needed to help their child attain even an average level of academic achievement. Along with great financial contributions, parents sacrificed many night-time activities to spend hours on homework.

Criminologists in general have addressed the family in many theories, and found it to be an important deterrent or initiator in a child's entrance or desistance from crime and delinquency. Hirschi (1969) centers his theory of social control on four bonds. The importance of one such bond, attachment, appears to be supported in this study. Parents of children with learning disability and non-delinquency retold positive stories and used positive descriptive words around the strength of their emotional attachment and relationship with their child. Despite some additional challenges presented by the learning disabled child, many parents were able to build on their child's strengths and utilize this to foster more positive relationships.

The learning-disabled-juvenile delinquents appeared to have much more strained relationships with family members and many of them focused on delinquent peer associations instead of the parent as sources of strength. However, despite discord in the parent-child relationship, all of the parents in the study, to some degree, were attached to and invested in their children. The families of non-delinquent youths appeared more capable and willing to invest in intensive parenting strategies to try to enhance their child's chances for success in academics and life more generally.

In the case of the child with a learning disability, "intensive parenting," the myopic focus invested on this child, appeared to produce the most successful outcomes. As parents searched for conventional activities for their children to participate in, finding the child's strength or "niche" appeared to bolster self-esteem and make the child feel successful, despite the complication of the label. This search for conventional activities supported another of Hirschi's elements of the bond, "involvement." When parents encourage and foster family time and activities, as well as other conventional activities such as sports, music, and church groups, as indicated in this study, it promotes less involvement in delinquent activities. In this study involvement's benefits could be twofold: promoting self-esteem and preventing delinquency.

These additional parenting activities, or what is referred to here as "intensive parenting," articulate the role of the family in preventing children from experiencing school failure--one of the possible links between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency. In this sample the "intensive parents" appeared to have more success in protecting their learning disabled children from both school failure and delinquency. With proper interventions by parents and in the school system it appears that children have the chance at a more successful outcome in the school environment.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

The primary limitation of this study related to sample size. This study was limited to 30 subjects for temporal and practical reasons. The sample was drawn from five school districts, only one of which was a large urban district. The remaining districts were medium to small rural districts. Additionally,

participants in the study were strictly voluntary; the views of the families who willingly participate may differ from those who would not choose to participate in a study.

Families were free to express their feelings to the researcher. Although the questions asked were not personal in nature, some parents may have felt embarrassed or self-conscious about giving information about the more complex or personal relationships in the family, and may have also felt the need to impress the researcher by minimizing problems or concerns. Although participants were assured confidentiality, some may have withheld information regarding the school system in order to protect their children.

The importance of positive and comprehensive educational services for the learning disabled population cannot be overstated. Children with learning disabilities both need and desire successful outcomes in their educational endeavors. Successful education impacts them while in school with issues related to self-esteem and peer acceptance, and also impacts their future and has some predictive power for their life chances in general. Programs that utilize and build family strengths, teach parenting as well as facilitate positive academics will be most successful.

This topic is one of importance in our society. For children with learning disabilities the wounds encountered from lack of empathy by teachers and society, unsuccessful productivity in the educational system and failure to implement successful interventions, may at minimum result in delinquency. Without change, these wounds will become scars in the hearts and minds of these children forever.

References

- Barone, C., Weissberg, R., Kasprow, W. J., & Voyce, C. K. (1995). Involvement in multiple behaviors of young urban adolescents. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 15*, 261-283.
- Baumrind, D. (1996). The discipline controversy revisited. *Family Relations, 45*, 405-414.
- Blacher, J. (1984). Sequential stages of parental adjustment to the birth of a child with handicaps. *Mental Retardation, 22*(2), 55-68.
- Boyce, G., & Barnett, W. (1991). Parenting children with downs syndrome: Do your activities and attitudes differ from parents of children without downs syndrome? Paper presented at the 19th annual convention of the National Downs Syndrome Congress, Boston.
- Brier, N. (1989). The relationship between learning disabilities and delinquency: A review and reappraisal. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 22*(9), 546-553.

- Boon, H. J. (2007). Low- and high-achieving Australian secondary school students: Their parenting, motivations and academic achievement. *Australian Psychologist*, 42, 212-225.
- Broder, P., Dunivant, N., Smith, E., & Sutton, L. (1981). Further observations on the link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 73(6), 838-850.
- Cernkovich, S., & Giordano, P. (1992). School bonding, race and delinquency. *Criminology*, 30(2), 261-291.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967). *The antecedents of self-esteem*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Deshler, D. D., Schumaker, J. B., Lenz, K., Bulgren, J. A., Hock, M. F., & Knight, J. (2001). Ensuring content area learning by secondary students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 16, 96-108.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (1985). The pragmatic skills of learning disabled children: A review. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 18(4), 193-199.
- Dunivant, N. (1982). *The relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency: Executive summary*. Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts.
- Dyson, L. (1996). The experiences of families of children with learning disabilities: Parental stress, family functioning, and sibling self-concept. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29, 280-286.
- Empey, L. T. (1982). *American delinquency: Its meaning and construction*. Rev Ed. Homewood, Ill: Dorsey.
- Erikson, E. (1982). *The lifecycle completed: Review*. New York: Norton.
- Falik, L. (1995). Family patterns of reaction to a child with a learning disability: A mediational perspective. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 28(6), 335-341.
- Gallico, R., Burns, T., & Grob, L. (1988). *Emotional and behavioral problems in children with learning disabilities*. Boston Mass: College Hill Press.
- Gecas, V., (1981). Contexts of socialization. In Morris Rosenberg and Ralph H. Turner (Eds.), *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives* (pp. 165-195). New York: Basic Books.

- Green, R. (1992). "Learning to learn" and the family system. New perspectives on underachievement and learning disorders: In M.J. Fine & C. Carlson (Eds), *The Handbook of Family School Intervention. A Systems Perspective* (pp. 157-174). Needham Heights MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hastings, P. D., McShane, K. E., & Parker, R. (2007). Ready to make nice: Parental socialization of young sons' and daughters' prosocial behaviors with peers. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 168, 177-200.
- Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. University of California, Berkley, Los Angeles and London.
- Innocenti, M., Huh, K., & Boyce, G. (1992). Families of children with disabilities: Normative data and other considerations on parenting stress. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 12, 403-427.
- Jarjoura, G. R. (1993). Does dropping out of school enhance delinquent involvement? Results from a large- scale probability sample. *Criminology*, 31, 149-172.
- Jenkins, P. (1997). School delinquency and the school social bond. *Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency*, 34(3), 337-367.
- Johnson, R., O'Reilly, M., & Vostanis, P. (2006). Caring for children with learning disabilities who present problem behaviours: a maternal perspective. *Journal of Child Healthcare*, 10(3), 188-198.
- Karavasilis, L., Doyle, A. B., & Markiewicz, D. (2003). Associations between parenting style and attachment to mother in middle childhood and adolescence. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 27, 153-164.
- Keilitz, I., Zaremba, B., & Broder, P. K. (1979). The link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency some issues and answers. *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*, 2(2), 2-11.
- Konstantareas, M., & Homatidis, S. (1989). Parental perception of learning-disabled children's adjustment problems and related stress. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 17, 177-188.
- Lamborn, S. D., Mounts, N. S., & Steinberg, L., & Dornsbuch, S. M. (1991). Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful families. *Child Development*, 62, 1049-1065.

- Larson, K. (1988). A research review and alternative hypothesis explaining the link between learning disabilities and delinquency. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 21*, 357-369.
- Levin, E., Zigmond, N., & Birch, J. (1985). A follow up study of 52 learning disabled adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 18*(1), 2-7.
- Malmgren, K. Abbott, R., & Hawkins, J. (1999). LD and delinquency: Rethinking the “link”. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 32*(3), 194-200.
- Maguin, E., & Loeber, R. (1996). Academic performance and delinquency. In M. Tonry (Ed.), *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research* (pp. 145-264). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Margalit, M., & HeimAn, T. (1986). Family climate and anxiety of families with learning disabled boys. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 25*, 841-856.
- Marvin, R., & Pianta, R. (1996). Mothers’ reaction to their child's diagnosis: Relations with security and attachment. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 25*, 436-445.
- McNamara, J. K., & Willoughby, T. (2010). A longitudinal study of risk-taking behavior in adolescents with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 25*, 11–24.
- Meltzer, L., Roditi, B., & Fenton, N. (1986). Cognitive and learning profiles of delinquent and learning disabled Adolescents. *Adolescence, 21*(83), 581-591.
- Morris, K. A., & Morris, R. J. (2006). Disability and juvenile delinquency: Issues and trends. *Disability & Society, 21*, 613–627.
- Murray, C. (1976). *The link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency: Current theory and knowledge*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.
- National Center for Educational Statistics (2012). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/>.
- Oshima, K. M. M., Huang, J., Jonson-Reid, M., & Drake, B. (2010). Children with disabilities in poor households: association with juvenile and adult offending. *Social Work Research, 34*, 102–113.
- Osman, B. (1979). *Learning disabilities: A family affair*. New York: Random House.

- Paulus, P., Nagar, D., Larey, T., & Camacho, L. (1996). Environmental, lifestyle, and psychological factors in the health and well being of military families. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 26, 2053-2075.
- Pearl R., & Bryan T. (1994). Getting caught in misconduct: Conceptions of adolescents with and without learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27, 193-197.
- Pickar, D., & Tori, C. (1986). The learning disabled adolescent: Eriksonian psychosocial development, self-concept, and delinquent behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 15, 429-440.
- Quine, L., & Paul, J. (1985). Examining the causes of stress in families with severely mentally handicapped children. *British Journal of Social Work*, 15, 501-517.
- Quinn, M., Rutherford, R., Leone, P., Osher, D., & Poirier, J. (2005). Youth with disabilities in juvenile correction: A national survey. *Council for Exceptional Children*, 71(3), 339-345.
- Roach, M., Ormond, G., & Barratt, M. (1999). Mothers and fathers of children with downs syndrome: Parental stress and involvement in children. *American Journal of Mental Retardation*, 104, 422-436.
- Rosenbaum, J., & Lasley, J. (1990). School, community context and delinquency: Rethinking the gender gap. *Justice Quarterly*, September, 493-513. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shandra, C., & Hogan, D. (2012) Delinquency among adolescents with disabilities. *Child Indicators Research*, 5(4), 771-788.
- Smith, C. (1998). *Learning Disabilities: The interaction of learner, task, and setting*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Steinberg, L., Lamborn, S. D., Darling, N., & Mounts, N. S. (1994). Over-time changes in adjustment and competence among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful families. *Child Development*, 65, 754-770.
- Stevens, S. (1996). *The LD child and the ADHD child: Ways parents and professionals can help*. Winston Salem, NC: John F. Blair.
- Turnbull, A. & Ruef, M. (1996). Family perspectives on problem behavior. *Mental Retardation*, 34(5), 280-293.

- Turnbull, A., & Turnbull, H. R.III. (1990). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: A special partnership*. Revised edition, Columbus, Oh: Merrill.
- Waggoner, K. & Wilgosh, L. (1990). Concerns of families with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23(2), 97-113.
- Waldi, K., & Spreen, O. (1993). The relationship between learning disabilities and persisting delinquency. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 26(6), 417-423.
- White, J., Moffitt, T., Earls, F., Robins, L., & Silva, P. (1990). How early can we tell? Predictors of childhood conduct disorder and adolescent delinquency. *Criminology*, 28(4), 507-527.
- Winters, C. (1997). Learning disabilities, crime, delinquency and special education placement. *Adolescence*, 32(126), 452-462.
- Zimmerman, J., Rich, W., Keilitz, I., & Broder P. (1981). Some observations on the link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 9, 1-17.

Appendix A:
Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Tell me about your child's school.
3. Tell me about your child's friends.
4. What are some things that stress you out as a parent?
5. Tell me about your child's learning disability.
6. How has the learning disability affected your family?
7. Tell me about your relationship with the child with the disability.
8. How do you parent your child with the disability?
9. What do you feel are the major concerns or frustrations you and your child face as a result of the learning disability?
10. If you could change some things for or about your child with the learning disability, what would they be?