Relationships between child behavior problems and family functioning: A literature review

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Abstract

In this study a literature review is presented on the relationship between family functioning and child behavior problems. We focussed on parenting styles, intergenerational relationships, family structure and family interaction patterns. We concluded that child behavior problems are related to a lack of parental support, an imbalanced parent-child relationship, a lack of cohesion and structure in the family, and a poor quality of communication between parents and children. We discussed causality of these relationships and implications for family interventions.

Key words: parenting, family functioning, behavior problems

Introduction

In the literature, a lot of attention has been devoted to finding explanations for the origin of child behavior problems, because insight in factors causing child behavior problems may create possibilities for intervention and prevention. Generally, it is assumed that family functioning is somehow related to child development and to child behavior problems. In this article we will focus on aspects of family functioning that are related to child behavior problems. According to Petzold (1998), the concept of family functioning is very important in studying children's behavior, as the family is responsible for supporting, protecting and guiding the children. According to L'Abate (1998), it is generally assumed that there are strong and influential links between family functioning and individual behavior, and that dysfunctional individuals generally grow up in dysfunctional families. Family functioning can be described from several viewpoints, for example focusing on parenting styles (Cusinato, 1998), intergenerational relationships (Cicirelli, 1998), family composition and structure (Petzold, 1998), and familial interaction patterns (Brunner, 1998). In the next sections, we discuss how these aspects of family functioning are related to child behavior problems.

Aspects of family functioning related to child behavior problems

The parenting approach

Many articles deal with the relationship between child behavior problems and parental child rearing strategies (e.g., Baumrind, 1996; Cusinato, 1998; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Dadds, 1987; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Shucksmith, Hendry, & Glendinning, 1995). The literature on child rearing generally focuses on two dimensions, that is, support and control. Support can be defined as parental behavior that induces the child to feel accepted, comfortable, and approved of, and refers to warmth and responsiveness. Warmth refers to parents' emotional expression of love and empathy, and their creation of a warm and accepting atmosphere. Responsiveness can be defined as parents being sensitive to the needs and feelings of their child and reacting adequately in this respect.

Parental control is defined by Rollins and Thomas (1979, p. 321) as 'behavior of the parent toward the child with the intent of directing the behavior of the child in a manner desirable to the parents'. Concerning control, two qualitatively distinct dimensions can be distinguished, that is coercive control and demanding control. Coercive control refers to parents using external pressure on their child to behave according to their desires and refers to the use of physical punishment, deprivation of privileges, and threatening (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Demanding control refers to parents' maturity demands, supervision and monitoring. Parents set clear rules and standards, but at the same time they encourage children's independence and individuality. Parents attempt to obtain children's compliance by using inductive discipline, which refers to parents' giving suggestions and explanations, reasoning, and pointing to the consequences of the child's behavior for self and others (Baumrind, 1996; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979).

Studies on parental behavior consistently indicate that parental support and demanding control are related to positive developmental outcomes in children, whereas coercive control is related to children's social incompetence and behavior problems (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979; Shucksmith et al., 1995). It appears that harsh disciplinary practices (and severe punishment) as well as lax, erratic, inconsistent discipline are associated with children's externalizing behavior problems (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Kazdin, 1987).

Based on the dimensions of support and control, a number of parenting styles can be identified, namely authoritarian parenting (high control, low support), authoritative parenting (high control, high support), permissive parenting (low control, high support), and neglectful parenting (low control, low support). Research clearly showed that authoritative parenting is the most effective parenting style, as it is associated with positive social and cognitive development, and independence in children (Baumrind, 1996; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Shucksmith et al., 1995).

The question that arises, is how parents can exert control in an effective way within the context of an authoritative parenting style. First, parents can exert control in a demanding, rather than a coercive way. Furthermore, concerning the dimension of parental control, it has been recently emphasized that relations between parental discipline (firm control or strictness) and positive child outcomes, are dependent on the context of the parent-child relationship; positive outcomes are more likely 'when firm control is accompanied by verbal give and take, if the child perceives the parents' rules as legitimate and if parents have respect for the individuality of the child' (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995, p. 101). Baumrind (1996) stated that within a warm, responsive parent-child relationship, firm control, with occasionally the use of external pressure, or punishment, is positively related to child development. 'The notion that children can or should be raised without using aversive discipline is utopian' (Baumrind, 1996, p. 409). According to Baumrind, it is not aversive discipline per se, but its

arbitrary use that can be harmful for children (for example, parents punish undesired behavior at times, but at other times they ignore or reinforce the same behavior). In this respect, the contingent, consistent use of discipline is emphasized (Baumrind, 1996; Cusinato, 1998; Patterson, et al., 1992). This means that positive or negative reinforcers should consistently and immediately follow desired or undesired child behavior, respectively. Another aspect of parental control that received a lot of attention recently, is parental supervision or monitoring (Baumrind, 1996; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Holmbeck, et al., 1995; Kazdin, 1987; Patterson, et al., 1992). Parental monitoring or supervision means that parents keep involved with their children, and consistently know their whereabouts: where and with whom they are, what they are doing, and when they will be home. Monitoring may also refer to a household organization with clear and consistent rules and responsibilities. The concept of monitoring gets increasingly important when children enter middle childhood and adolescence. Children spend more time with peers and adults outside the family, and they develop increasing capacity for self-regulation and self-control. Parents expect more autonomy and responsibility from their children, and supervise and guide their children's activities at a distance. This shift in parental control is described as a three phase developmental process: from parental regulation, to co-regulation, and finally to self-regulation of the child (Collins, Harris, & Susman, 1995; Holmbeck et al., 1995).

The intergenerational approach

The intergenerational theory on family functioning tries to explain child behavior problems from the quality of the relationship between child and parents. The key concept of this theory is loyalty, which is considered crucial for the parent-child relationship (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991; Boszormenyi-Nagy, & Ulrich 1981; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Seaburn, Landau-Stanton, & Horwitz, 1995). Loyalty can refer to vertical loyalty and horizontal loyalty.

Vertical loyalty refers to the relationship between parents and their children. Because a child is born to his/her parents and because the child is taken care of by the parents, the child owes loyalty to the parents, just as the parents owe the child care and affection. This means that the child, by nature, has to conform to the expectations of the parents and to adopt and internalize their norms and values; he/she is loyal to his/her roots. The parents, by nature, are responsible for parenting, and caring for their children. Thus, a balance of giving and taking may emerge between parents and child (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Boszormenyi-Nagy, et al., 1991). Whether parents and child are satisfied with their mutual relationship, depends on whether they are able to fulfil their own needs, but also on whether they are able to consider the other's needs, and to give concern and gratitude. Thus, children are inherently loyal to their parents; they are not only obliged to give, but also have a *right* to give. However, the parent-child relationship is thought to be asymmetrical for some time, as parents (because of age and development) are more capable of giving, than their young children are.

Horizontal loyalty refers to someone's relationships with peers, partners, siblings and friends. These relationships are also characterized by the balance of giving and taking mentioned above. However, the difference between vertical and horizontal loyalty, is that horizontal relationships can be easily broken up, whereas the bond between parents and children is existentially given and can not be broken up (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973).

When problems arise in a family, the loyalty bonds of family members should be looked at, to explain these problems. Loyalty problems may result in children showing problem behavior; internalizing behavior problems (e.g. anorexia, psychosis, phobia) as well as externalizing behavior problems (e.g., acting out behavior, delinquency, avoidance, coldness, indifference). These problems may arise if there is imbalance of giving and taking between parents and children (Boszormenyi-Nagy, et al., 1991; Boszormenyi-Nagy, & Ulrich 1981; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Seaburn et al., 1995).

First, problems may occur when parents receive a lot of support and concern from their children, but do not give enough support and concern in return, or if they do not acknowledge their children's efforts. If parents are not able to take their parental responsibilities, children may take over these responsibilities, which is called parentification (which means that children take over parents' roles). When this happens, the child's own needs and interests are not paid enough attention to, and the child may be overburdened.

Second, the balance of giving and taking between parents and child may cause problems, when parents are non receiving and thus deny the child's need and 'right' to give. These parents act overprotecting. They give a lot to the child, but do not ask anything in return.

Third, children may be caught in a split loyalty situation. This happens when parents do not trust each other or make different demands on the child, so the child can only be loyal to one parent at the cost of his or her loyalty to the other parent. The child is torn between the two parents, which may result in the child showing misbehavior to avoid a choice between the parents, and eventually to unite the parents in their approach of the difficult child. A related problem occurs when one parent expects the child to align with him/her against the other parent. Again, the child is drawn in a split loyalty situation.

As intergenerational theory is characterized by a multigenerational perspective, these patterns of loyalty problems are supposed to evolve and be passed on across several generations. If parents received little care and support from their parents, they may tend to give their own children little care and support, expecting their children to give them the care and support they were lacking when they were young. In the same way, parents who did not have the opportunity to give concern and support to their parents when they were young, may tend to give to their children what they were not able to give to their parents. Again, the children lack the opportunity to give support to their parents. This is called an 'intergenerational linkage of substitutive balancing' (Boszormenyi-Nagy, et al., 1991, p. 212).

Fourth, problems in family functioning may be caused by loyalty conflicts. Loyalty conflicts refer to a conflict between vertical loyalty (the loyalty between child and parents) and loyalty to peers. This may happen when norms, values and expectations of parents and peers do not match, and the child is not able to be loyal to parents and peers as well. Sometimes, these loyalty conflicts result in invisible loyalty, with the child denying or ignoring the relationship, or the importance of the relationship with his or her parents. The child acts as if he or she does not care about parents' needs, interests and expectations. Sometimes, however, children may choose entirely their parents' side, and fail to build up relationships with peers and age mates. As a consequence, social and autonomy development may be hampered.

According to the intergenerational theory, family problems are most likely to emerge during developmental transitions in family life (e.g. adolescence, separation, marriage, death, leaving home). Such transitions bring new demands and necessitate negotiations and change (new needs and interests of family members, growing autonomy of children within intimacy and connectedness with parents, etc.). These transitions require a redefinition of loyalty commitments, of the balance of needs and rights to give and receive, and thus provide opportunity for growth and enrichment, but also for problems to arise (Boszormenyi-Nagy, et al., 1991; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich 1981; Seaburn, et al., 1995).

The structural approach

Theories on family structure not only take into account the parent-child relationship, but also stress the structure and organization of the whole family system in trying to explain child behavior problems. According to Colapinto (1991), building on the work of Minuchin (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), the function of the family is to support, regulate, nurture, and socialize its members. Family members always have to find some balance between dependency and relatedness on the one hand, and autonomy and individuation on the other hand. To function adequately, families need structure and hierarchy. Family structure

has to do with the organization of the family, and is described with the concepts of family sub-systems and boundaries. Subsystems refer to various subgroupings within the family. Each subsystem serves specific functions in the family. The subsystem of the spouses (parents), for example, serves the function of marital intimacy and support, but also the function of parental tasks and responsibilities, such as supporting, guiding, and disciplining the children. The sub-system of the siblings, for example, may serve as the children's first peer group in which they learn about social rules. The concept of boundaries refers to the rules that define who partici-pates in which subsystems. For example, rules about who is in charge of the children, who makes decisions in child rearing issues, etc. The boundaries within a family need to be strong and clear, but also permeable; when boundaries are extremely rigid and impermeable, there may be a lack of contact and communication between members of various subsystems; when boundaries are unclear however, the members of a subsystem are not able to carry out their tasks and functions adequately (and without interference of other family members). The hier-archy within a family has to do with the concepts of boundaries and subsystems, and refers to the rules concerning the degree to which each family member or family subsystem has deci-sion-making power.

However, although families need a clear structure, they also need to adapt this structure, as the family goes through its developmental stages (e.g., family with young children, children entering adolescence, children leaving home). Healthy families are constantly adapting and re-arranging their subsystems and boundaries (or rules) in response to developmental changes. For example, when children grow older, they can handle an increasing degree of autonomy, and need less, or more distant parental discipline and guidance (Colapinto, 1991). Family dys-function and individual problems of family members are assumed to be related to these con-cepts of family structure, hierarchy, and adaptability.

Concerning family structure, problems may arise when the boundaries between family subsys-tems are overly rigid or overly weak. When the boundaries are overly rigid, there is emotional distance between family members, and a lack of mutual emotional support, nurturance, and protection. This lack of involvement with each other may result in high tolerance for devia-tion, such as children's problem behavior. The concept of disengagement is used to describe this situation of rigid boundaries. When the boundaries are overly weak, there is over-involvement and extreme proximity between family members, which is called enmeshment. This may result in a lack of individual differentiation and autonomy. Children may develop problem behavior since the child's social development and development of autonomy is hin-dered. According to Colapinto (1991), enmeshment appears to be related to psychosomatic as well as antisocial child behavior, whereas disengagement appears to be related primarily to an-tisocial behavior.

Concerning hierarchy in a family, problems may arise when the hierarchy is weak and ineffec-tive, or when the hierarchy is extremely rigid. In the first case, rules and responsibilities are unclear, and children experience a lack of guidance and protection. In case of a rigid hierarchy, children lack autonomy, and power struggles may characterize parent-child interaction. Fur-thermore, hierarchy problems may be caused by a dysfunctional parental subsystem, for ex-ample when parents are in conflict. This may result in crossgenerational coalitions, if one par-ent tries to align with the child against the other parent. It is also possible that children develop behavior problems to distract attention from marital conflict and to unite the parents in their approach of his/her problems, and thus protect the family system. This is called a family triad. In what is called a detouring-attacking triad, the child may develop externalizing behavior problems and function as a scapegoat at which parents can direct their anger. In what is called a detouring-protecting triad, the child develops internalizing or psycho-somatic prob-lems, that unite the parents in their concern for the child (Colapinto, 1991).

Concerning family adaptability, family problems can be explained by a failure to adapt the family structure to internal or external stressors and challenges (e.g. adolescence, divorce, dis-eases, financial stressors, etc.). In general, this is expressed in conflict avoidance. In case of en-meshed families conflict avoidance may take the form of denying differences and disagree-

ments, in case of disengaged families a lack of interpersonal contact may lead to conflict avoidance. Even 'constant bickering' between family members may be a form of conflict avoidance, as they may express their hostility and anger toward each other, without negotiating the actual conflicts (Colapinto, 1991, p. 428). According to Colapinto (1991) disengaged families tend to be disorganized and unstable, whereas enmeshed families can be characterized as overorganized, overprotecting, overly stable, rigid, overly controlling, and lacking flexibility in transactions and conflict negotiation.

Olson and colleagues (Gorall & Olson, 1995; Olson, 1994; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979) elaborated on the idea of family structure, as they studied several family systems theories and concluded that two dimensions appear to underlie most family system theories, that is, cohesion and flexibility. The different degrees of cohesion and flexibility in a family are supposed to be related to the functioning of the family. These dimensions of cohesion and flexibility (the latter was conceptualized as adaptability until 1992) resemble Colapinto's concepts of family structure and adaptability described above. Cohesion is defined as the emotional bonding or closeness of family members with each other and family flexibility as the amount of change in its leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules (Gorall & Olson, 1995; Olson, 1994; Olson, et al., 1979). Olson et al. (1979) have distinguished four types of families for each of the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility. Concerning cohesion, families can be characterized as enmeshed, connected, separated, or disengaged (on a dimension ranging from very high cohesion to very low cohesion). It is hypothesized that problems arise in extreme family types: Enmeshed families are characterized by an overidentification with the family, resulting in extreme bonding and involvement, whereas disengaged families are characterized by low emotional bonding and lack of involvement. Concerning flexibility, families can be characterized as chaotic, flexible, structured, or rigid (on a dimension ranging from very high flexibility to very low flexibility). Again it is assumed that poor family functioning is related to extreme family types: Chaotic families are characterized by a lack of leadership and by unclear roles and rules that often change, whereas rigid families are characterized by authoritarian leadership and rigid, strictly enforced rules and roles.

As said before, in the literature on the structural approach, not only family cohesion and adaptability are considered relevant aspects of family functioning, but also family hierarchy. A clear family hierarchy is promoted by a healthy functioning parental subsystem (Colapinto, 1991). An important aspect of the functioning of the parental subsystem is the parents' marital relationship (Colapinto, 1991). In the literature, child behavior problems and adjustment problems have been associated with poor marital relationships (Bond & McMahon, 1984; Emery, 1982; Fainsilber Katz & Gottman, 1993; Wierson & Forehand, 1992). Fainsilber Katz and Gottman (1993) studied marital interaction and found that particularly a mutually hostile interaction pattern between parents, a pattern characterized by a great deal of hostile marital interaction and mutually contemptuous remarks, better predicted children's externalizing behaviors than a more global measure of marital satisfaction. Erel and Burman (1995) conducted a meta-analysis on data relating marital quality to the quality of the parent-child relationship. They found support for a positive relationship between the quality of the marital and parent-child relationship. Although the association was of only moderate magnitude, the association appeared relatively robust and stable, as no effects of potential moderators of the relationship were found. Thus, they concluded that positive parent-child relationships are less likely, when the relationship between parents is troubled.

The influence of marital interaction and marital quality on children's behavior and adjustment might be explained by a modeling process (children acquire negative negotiation and interaction patterns by observational learning), by a process in which parenting practices and parent-child interactions serve as mediators between marital interaction and child adjustment, or by the stress that marital hostile interactions impose on children.

The communication approach

In the literature, child externalizing behavior problems are often related to the communication and interactions between parents and children. The quality of the relationship between family members is supposed to be expressed in these interactions and child behavior problems are assumed to be related to dysfunctional interactions between parents and children. Dysfunctional interaction patterns are characterized by power struggle, misunderstanding, criticizing, and attacking each other. Parents and child accuse each other of having caused the trouble, without being aware that it is an interactional problem and that most of the time it is difficult or even impossible to find out who initiated the problem (Bodin, 1981; Lange, 1994; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This may lead either to endless escalating conflicts or to avoidance of conflicts. According to Olson et al. (1983) and Clark and Shields (1997) families with a child with behavior problems differ from families with a child without behavior problems, in that the communication between family members is less open and problems and feelings cannot easily be discussed.

Family communication processes are considered crucial for healthy family functioning and organization (Walsh, 1995). Especially clarity of communication is viewed as important: Verbal as well as nonverbal messages need to be consistent and congruent. According to Walsh, functional families are characterized by a climate of mutual trust. Free expression of emotions, opinions and responses in a caring, empathic way, and with tolerance of differences, is encouraged. Dysfunctional families, however, are characterized by a climate of mistrust, criticism, blaming, and scapegoating. Sometimes family members block communication and avoid sharing vulnerable, painful, or threatening feelings, which is destructive since communicating is necessary for resolving problems. Otherwise, highly emotional expression of feelings can also be destructive, since it evokes emotional conflicts and feelings of despair.

Thus, well-functioning families are not characterized by an absence of problems, but by their problem solving abilities. Functional problem solving processes consist of several steps: identifying the problem, communicating about it with the persons involved, developing possible solutions, deciding on the best alternative, monitoring whether the solution is carried out well, and finally evaluating the effectiveness of the problem solving process (Walsh, 1995).

Patterson et al. (1992) developed a more detailed view on the influence of family interactions on child behavior, described in their social interactional stage model of children's antisocial behavior. They focused on boys, as patterns of antisocial behavior and its development might be different for girls. In family interactions, most antisocial behaviors consist of mildly aversive (or coercive) behaviors, such as whining, yelling, teasing, threatening, having temper tantrums, or hitting. The social interactional model is based on the idea that parent-child interactions are important determinants of children's antisocial behavior. Children are thought to develop antisocial behavior in four stages: stage 1, basic training; stage 2, reaction of the social environment; stage 3, deviant peers and polishing antisocial skills; and stage 4, the career antisocial adult. The first stage of basic training usually starts with decreased parental effectiveness in family management and child rearing skills. The child learns to show aversive behavior to turn down aversive behavior of other family members and to get what he or she wants. When this happens more often, these aversive exchanges may escalate; the aversive behavior exchanges increase in duration and become more intense. During stage 2, the child enters school and has to cope with two developmental tasks: relating to peers and developing academic skills. Because the child was trained in the family to use aversive behaviors to refuse parental requests, he (as Patterson et al.'s model was developed for boys) may tend to use these same behaviors to manipulate teachers and peers. Thus, the child may fail in academic skills, and may be rejected by his normal peers, which may lead to stage 3, at which the child relates to deviant peers, who were also rejected by normal peers. Thus, a deviant peer group may develop, with a negative view on adult authority. Such deviant peergroups appear to be related to adolescent delinquency and substance abuse. The lack of parental monitoring and discipline further increases the risk for engaging in deviant peer groups. Finally, stage 4, the career antisocial adult,

is based on research findings, that indicate that antisocial children often experience problems in (young) adulthood, such as unemployment, substance abuse, high risk of divorce, and having antisocial children themselves.

This model is based on the idea that children who are at a certain stage of the model, are at risk for entering the next step of the model. However, not all children who are trained in antisocial behavior at home, fail at school. And not all children failing at school, enter a deviant peer group. However, children who are at an advanced stage of the model, presumably moved through the earlier stages as well.

To return to family interaction and communication, how can parent-child interaction in problem families be characterized? According to Patterson et al. (1992) antisocial behavior is usually part of so called escape contingencies, which is a form of coercion. Escape contingencies refer to a sequence of one person acting aversively toward another person, with the second person reacting in such an aversive way that the first person stops with the aversive behavior. The second person has learned that his or her aversive behavior had effect, and may use it again in the future. For example: mother scolds the child to clean up his room, the child yells and argues, mother stops scolding, and the child stops yelling and arguing. Thus, the child has learned to yell and argue to escape from mother's requests, and mother has learned not to scold anymore (as the child reinforced mother, by stopping his aversive behavior as soon as she stopped scolding). Patterson et al. (1992, p. 42) call this the 'reinforcement trap', which means that in the short term family members are satisfied with the results of their actions (in the example mentioned above, the child stops yelling and arguing, and mother stops scolding), whereas in the long term the consequences are not that positive (as the child has learned to yell and argue to escape from requests, and mother has learned to give in to the child's aversive behavior). Thus, coercion training refers to interactions between family members, consisting of frequent initiations of aversive interactions, and a tendency to withdraw once the other family member 'counterattacks' (Patterson, et al., 1992, p. 42).

Patterson et al. (1992) hypothesize the frequency (or proportion) and duration of aversive behaviors to be higher in problem families than in normal families. Furthermore, the structure of social exchanges in problem families might be different from the structure of the interactions in normal families. This structure refers to the sequencing of the family members' behaviors and to the question of whether behaviors are contingent on one another. For example, when the child whines, the likelihood that mother yells at the child is increased. Thus, family members reactions appear to be functionally related to each other. According to Patterson et al. (1992), the structure of coercive interactions between parents and child can be defined by the concepts of negative synchronicity and negative continuance. Negative synchronicity refers to one family member reacting aversively immediately following the aversive behavior of the other family member. Continuance refers to the likelihood that a family member reacts aversively, and continues to be aversive, regardless of the reaction of the other family member (Patterson, et al., 1992). It is expected that negative synchronicity and negative continuance occur at higher rates in problem families than in normal families. In normal families aversive behavior of a family member is often ignored, or it is stopped by a prosocial or neutral reaction. In problem families aversive behavior of a family member may often lead to a sequence of aversive exchanges; family interaction is more defensive.

Although coercive exchanges occur at a significantly higher rate in problem families than in normal families, they form only a small portion (about ten percent) of parent-child interactions. Furthermore, family members are often hardly aware of these coercive exchanges, as if it is some kind of thoughtless routine (Patterson, et al., 1992).

Furthermore, in studying the process of interaction patterns between family members, a lot of attention has been paid to interactions between husbands and wives. It was found that satisfied and dissatisfied married couples differ consistently in what is called negative affect reciprocity (Coan, Gottman, Babcock, & Jacobson, 1997; Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993; Wilson & Gottman, 1995). Negative affect reciprocity refers to cycles of negative behaviors, in which distressed couples become caught up. Husband and wife reciprocally at-

tack each other and defend themselves. Wilson and Gottman (1995, p. 38) refer to three-chain sequences of negative interchanges, that can be characterized by 'fighting on' or 'fighting back'. In these negative sequences, an aversive behavior of one person is followed by an aversive behavior of the other person, which is in turn followed by another aversive behavior of the first person. Furthermore, they suppose that these negative sequences may not only be characteristic of dissatisfied married couples, but may be characteristic of the interactions between parents and child in problem families as well. They state that 'just as in the marital relationship, negativity in families can become an absorbing state' (Wilson & Gottman, 1995, p. 46). They base their assumption on Patterson's ideas about cycles of coercion between parents and children (Patterson, 1982). It is assumed that parents and children use aversive behaviors to gain compliance from each other. However, more and more aversive events become necessary as the coercive cycle continues and as family members do not want to give in to each other. Thus, parent-child interactions in problem families may also be characterized by negative sequences, in which an aversive behavior of one family member is followed by an aversive behavior of another family member, which is in turn followed by another aversive behavior of the first family member.

Discussion

Relationships between family functioning and child behavior problems that are described in the literature are mostly based on empirical studies and clinical experience with families experiencing moderate to severe child rearing difficulties. Van As (1999) compared problem families experiencing only mild child rearing difficulties, with normal families, and found comparable results. In problem families, the parents were less supporting, the parent-child relationship was characterized by an imbalance, the family was judged less cohesive and less structured (at least according to the mothers and children), and the quality of the communication between parents and child was judged lower by both parents and children, than in normal families. Although the differences in scores between the problem and normal families were often small, they proved statistically significant. Family functioning in problem families was less efficient than in normal families. This may indicate that there is a continuum from normal family functioning to severe family dysfunctioning, as Kousemaker and Timmers-Huigens (1985) suggested. These authors distinguish four types of families. The normal families, placed at the one end of the continuum, are characterized by no special child rearing difficulties. The clinical problem families, placed at the other end of the continuum, experience severe and enduring difficulties in child rearing. Between these two poles Kousemaker and Timmers-Huigens distinguish between families experiencing stress in parenting, and families experiencing a crisis in parenting. The mildly disturbed problem families of Van As' (1999) study are comparable to families experiencing stress. Although these families do not experience severe difficulties, the parents of these families often seek help, in the form of advice, books or parent programs, to be better able to handle the daily hassles of parenting. The difference between the mildly disturbed problem families in Van As' study and the clinical problem families that are described in the literature is probably not a qualitative difference, but a difference of degree. In our view, this underscores the importance of prevention and early intervention programs, such as parent education programs. These early intervention programs may prevent family functioning from worsening and may help parents to improve their parenting practices, the relationship with their children, the family structure, and the communication with their children. Thus, these programs may prevent families from moving from the stage of parenting stresses to the stages of parenting crisis and enduring family dysfunctioning (Patterson et al., 1992).
The results on differences between the problem and normal families show that family functioning is clearly linked to child behavior problems. However, no conclusion can be drawn about the direction of effects. A less supporting parenting style, a disturbed parent-child rela-

tionship, a less cohesive and less clear family structure, and negative parent-child communication may, each, or in combination, cause child behavior problems. But the reverse may also be true. The most plausible explanation is one of transactional family processes, in which child behavior, parental functioning, and family functioning, influence each other and are influenced by each other at the same time in rather complex processes.

To investigate the direction of effects, longitudinal studies on family processes are needed, which enable us to study relationships between child, parental, and family characteristics over time (Lytton, 1990). Furthermore, the effects of intervention studies can tell us something about the direction of influence in family processes. For example, if parent programs directed at changing parental cognitions and behaviors, produce changes in child behavior, this would support the hypothesis that parental behavior directly influences child behavior. Of course, these findings do not deny the possible role of child effects on parental behavior, which may operate at the same time.

We tried to explain the development of child behavior problems from various theoretical approaches, that is, the parenting approach, the intergenerational family systems approach, the structural family systems approach, and the communication approach. Each approach uses its own concepts to explain relationships between child behavior problems and family factors. It could be argued that there are relationships between certain concepts, and that certain concepts might even focus at the same aspects of the reality of family life, while using different concepts. Although family problems may be labelled differently by the different theoretical approaches, the differences may be not as large as they seem to be at first sight. Van As (1999) found strong relations among concepts referring to the quality of the parent-child relation: parental support, vertical loyalty, family cohesion and positive parent-child communication. So, the concept of family functioning refers to the interrelated aspects of parenting practices, the quality of the parent-child relationship, family structure, and the communication between family members. According to Lange (1994), in helping families experiencing child rearing difficulties, it would be best to pay attention to all these aspects of family functioning. Thus, all factors of family functioning that might be related to child behavior problems are subsequently examined to build a complete picture of the family's functioning. Interventions can subsequently address those aspects of family functioning that need improvement most urgently. By examining all aspects of family functioning, one can prevent situations in which problem families are helped by improving one aspect of family functioning, whereas other aspects of family functioning that need improvement too and that preserve the problematic situation, are ignored. More information on the relationship between family functioning and child behavior problems will be helpful to address relevant issues in intervention programs.

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