

1 Developmental associations between conduct problems and expressive language in

2 early childhood: A population-based study

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CONDUCT PROBLEMS AND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Conduct problems have been associated with poor language development, however the direction of this association in early childhood remains unclear. This study examined the longitudinal directional associations between conduct problems and expressive language ability. Children enrolled in the UK Millennium Cohort Study (N = 14, 004; 50.3% boys) were assessed at 3 and 5 years of age. Parent reports of conduct problems and standardised assessments of expressive language were analyzed using cross-lagged modeling. Conduct problems at 3 years was associated with poorer expressive language at 5 years and poorer expressive language at 3 years was associated with increased conduct problems by 5 years. The results support reciprocal associations, rather than a specific unidirectional path, which is commonly found with samples of older children. The emergence of problems in either domain can thus negatively impact upon the other over time, albeit the effects were modest. Studies examining the effects of intervention targeting conduct problems and language acquisition prior to school entry may be warranted in testing the efficacy of prevention programmes related to conduct problems and poor language ability early in childhood.

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11 4 The acquisition of language in infancy is dependent on the social learning
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13 5 environment and the quality of communicative experiences, achieved primarily through
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15 6 interactions between the parent and child (Bruner, 1984; Hoff, 2006). That is, toddlers
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17 7 begin to develop language through imitation, listening to others, and direct instruction
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19 8 (Hoff, 2006). If opportunities for engagement in multiple verbal turn-taking interactions
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21 9 are less frequent, or there is a lack of cognitive stimulation for the child, poorer language
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23 10 ability may result. Children engaged in early displays of conduct problems may thus
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25 11 experience a reduced language rich environment as parents focus on reducing negative
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27 12 behaviours at the potential expense of language development (Dionne, Tremblay, Boivin,
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29 13 Laplante, & Perusse, 2003).
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36 14 Conversely, children with delayed or impaired language acquisition may lack the
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38 15 ability to express themselves through verbal outlets, potentially resulting in elevated
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40 16 frustration and engagement in conduct related behaviours as an alternative form of
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42 17 communication (Cole, Armstrong, & Pemberton, 2010). For example, early social
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44 18 situations are often characterized by the verbal exchange of wants, needs, sharing of
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46 19 feelings, and emotional states. Physical actions such as temper tantrums or aggressive
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48 20 behaviours may act as a replacement of this expression when children's vocabulary is
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50 21 under developed. Forms of verbal exchanges are highly important for children's social
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52 22 development and in building effective strategies for resolving conflict during social
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54 23 interactions (Rhee et al., 2013). Empirical studies with clinical samples have supported
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1 such negative associations between conduct problems and language acquisition in
2 childhood and adolescence (Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000; Brownlie et al., 2004;
3 Giddan, Milling, & Campbell, 1996; van Daal, Verhoeven, & van Balkom, 2007).

4 While direct associations between conduct problems and language have been
5 found, the emergence of either conduct problems or poor expressive language in the late
6 toddler years may also be dependent on other factors such as parenting behaviours and
7 child characteristics. For example, the theoretical perspective for the association from
8 conduct problems to poorer language ability is largely contingent upon the stimulation
9 and types of interactions that children receive from their environment and more
10 specifically from their parents. Harsh parenting has been implicated with elevated
11 externalizing behaviours problems, and to a lesser extent, with poorer language outcomes
12 (Del Vecchio, Pochtar, & Rhoades, 2014; Pungello, Iruka, Dotterer, Mills-Koonce, &
13 Reznick, 2009; Scaramella & Leve, 2004).

14 Additionally, studies have found that parental warmth and positive parent-child
15 interactions fosters language growth (Hann, Osofsky, & Culp, 1996) and has modest
16 impacts on the reduction of problematic behaviours (Gardner, Shaw, Dishion, Burton, &
17 Supplee, 2007). In the case of language, positive parenting can create engaging and safe
18 environments for exploration in which children feel comfortable in expressing their needs
19 and posing questions. This may consequently lead to more frequent dyadic exchanges,
20 which can promote language development through richer opportunities for
21 communication and an analyzable language model; both of which are required for
22 children to develop language (Hoff, 2006). The impact of such parenting behaviours,
23 especially in infancy and toddlerhood, on social and linguistic learning is not surprising

1 given that children primarily gain knowledge and experience of the world during social
2 interactions with parents (Bruner, 1982). Learning then occurs through imitation,
3 modeling, and subsequently reinforcement. However, the magnitude of the effect of
4 parenting behaviours across developmental domains is not always consistent. Thus, it is
5 important to partial out any variance that parenting factors may contribute towards either
6 conduct problems or expressive language.

7 From the available literature, possible comorbid externalizing behaviours such as
8 hyperactivity, in addition to cognitive ability, and the children's sex are also candidates
9 that may contribute directly to the emergence of either conduct problems or language
10 ability. For example, a review of prominent risk factors for conduct problems across
11 multiple epidemiological studies placed both hyperactivity and a low IQ among the
12 greatest individual risk factors longitudinally, with overall prevalence rates lower among
13 girls than boys (Murray & Farrington, 2010). Associations between language ability, IQ,
14 and sex have also been found (Rose, Feldman, & Jankowski, 2009; Yew, & O'Kearney,
15 2013).

16 The current literature is however limited in two important ways. First, with a few
17 notable exceptions (e.g., Dionne et al., 2003; Girard et al., 2014; Oliver, Dale, & Plomin,
18 2004; Silva, Williams, McGee, 1987; Stevenson & Richman, 1978), studies have not
19 focused on the directional associations between conduct related problems and language
20 acquisition commencing as early as the toddler years. This is an important limitation
21 given previous research suggesting that the associations between language ability and
22 externalizing problems are more common in the earlier years, while the associations

1 between language and internalizing behaviours are more prevalent in older children
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4 1 between language and internalizing behaviours are more prevalent in older children
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7 (Gallagher, 1999).
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9 3 From a developmental perspective, it is between the 2nd and 4th years of life
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11 4 when toddlers undergo very rapid vocabulary spurts (Rose, Feldman, & Jankowski,
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13 5 2009). It is also during this period when more frequent conduct related behaviours such
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15 6 as tantrums and aggression start to emerge. The literature shows that an increase in severe
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17 7 temper tantrums and aggression often occurs around the 2nd and 3rd years respectively,
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19 8 followed by a decline in a large majority of children around the 4th to 5th years (Alink et
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21 9 al., 2006; Tremblay, 2010). Given that the period between 3 and 5 years of age is
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23 10 implicated in the developmental trajectories of both language acquisition and conduct
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25 11 related problems, we may expect to find associations emerging during this period. Thus,
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27 12 there is a need for studies to examine the directional associations between language
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29 13 ability and conduct problems commencing in the late toddler years when these
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31 14 associations may start to present.
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38 15 A second notable limitation of this literature relates to the limited number of
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40 16 studies that have examined these associations using large cohorts sampled from the
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42 17 general population. The high reliance on, and the use of smaller clinical samples in
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44 18 previous work, may overestimate the magnitude of associations between conduct
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46 19 problems and language given potential issues related to higher comorbidity within these
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48 20 populations. This may lead to potential differences in the effect size; in addition the
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50 21 direction of the association may present differently. For example, a recent population-
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52 22 based Canadian cohort study found only modest associations between language ability
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54 23 and aggression up to 41 months with the direction of association changing over time.
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1 However, it was suggested that these associations were likely to be more indicative of
2 parallel, rather than predictive associations, with the onset of problems in both domains
3 being more dependent on other factors such as parenting behaviours (Girard et. al., 2014).
4 Population-based samples are also useful as the pool of participants to sample from is
5 larger (advantageous from a statistical perspective) and facilitates the examination of the
6 association in children with lower levels of risk (advantageous from a practical
7 perspective). Thus, there is a need for studies using large scale population cohorts to test
8 whether associations between conduct problems and language generalize to the general
9 pediatric population.

10 Objectives

11 The current study estimated the cross-lagged associations between conduct
12 problems and expressive language from 3 to 5 years of age in a UK birth cohort. As there
13 is increased interest in the evaluation of the cost benefit ratio for early preventative
14 efforts (e.g., Doyle, Harmon, Heckman, & Tremblay, 2009; Heckman, Moon, Pinto,
15 Savelyev, Yavitz, 2010), a clearer understanding of the directional nature of this
16 association in early childhood would help identify the targets and benefits of potential
17 interventions. Longitudinal designs commencing in the early years of development are
18 thus necessary to better understand whether early displays of conduct problems place
19 children at increased risk in their language acquisition or whether children with poorer
20 language development are at increased risk of future conduct problems.

21 As poorer language abilities can impinge on the use of verbal strategies for
22 communication, potentially resulting in reliance on negative behavioural forms of
23 communication such as temper tantrums and aggressive behaviours (Cole, Armstrong, &

Pemberton, 2010), we hypothesized that a negative cross-lagged association from language ability at 3 years of age to conduct problems at 5 years of age would be found. As conduct problems in the early years may cause parents to focus on the child's behavioural problems at the expense of their language learning (Dionne et al., 2003), it was also hypothesized that a negative cross-lagged association would be found from conduct problems at 3 to expressive language at 5. In addition, given the importance of the family environment and within-child characteristics on both conduct problems and language individually, these variables were included as covariates to observe whether the associations between conduct problems and expressive language would hold given their inclusion. While not exhaustive, we controlled for harsh and positive parenting, maternal depression, children's nonverbal cognition, hyperactivity/inattention, and sex (e.g., Asbury, Wachs, & Plomin, 2005; Beitchman et al., 1996; Beitchman et al., 2001; Derauf et al., 2011; Nozadi et al., 2013; Petrill, Pike, Price, & Plomin, 2004; Yew, & O'Kearney, 2013). We expected all associations to hold over and above any direct effects of the control variables on conduct problems and expressive language.

Methods

Participants

Children and their families included in the study were enrolled in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). Families who were residents in the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) with infants born between 2000 and 2002 and who were eligible for child benefits were invited to participate in the MCS. Child benefit is a universal payment scheme in the UK whereby all parents or guardians responsible for the care of a child under the age of 16 receive monetary payments¹. Two exceptions to this are

1 families whose residency status is either temporary or uncertain. The Department of
2 Work and Pensions (DWP), now the Department of Social Security, sent letters to all
3 eligible families detailing the purpose of the overall MCS and inviting them to participate
4 (Shaw & Calderwood, 2004). Families who did not wish to take part could opt-out by
5 telephoning or by writing to the DWP. The field response rate in the first wave of the
6 study at 9 months was documented in the technical report of the MCS1 as 81% (N = 18
7 553). Given the inherent attrition typical in longitudinal studies, the present study
8 included children who had data on conduct problems and expressive language (wave 2
9 and 3) which resulted in N = 14, 004 (75.5% of the families that were enrolled in wave
10 1). The sample included 7, 049 boys (i.e., 50.3%). Demographic characteristics for the
11 entire cohort and those that were included in the present study are presented in Table 1.
12 Attrition analyses were conducted to examine potential differences between the entire
13 cohort and the 14, 004 families included in the current study. Chi square tests revealed
14 significant differences between groups on employment at 9 months, $\chi^2 (1) = 181.51, p = <$
15 $.001$; marital status, $\chi^2 (2) = 90.02, p = < .001$; ethnic group, $\chi^2 (2) = 364.20, p = < .001$;
16 and highest maternal academic qualification, $\chi^2 (8) = 453.03, p = < .001$, whereby the
17 group included in the current study were slightly more advantaged compared to the entire
18 cohort as is common with patterns of attrition in longitudinal studies.

19 ¹ Amendments have since been made to the child benefit scheme in the UK, which are now means-tested.
20 As of 2013, eligibility is determined based on family income.

21
22 All MCS data is publicly available through the UK Data Archive. Stratification
23 procedures for the cohort are documented extensively elsewhere (Dex & Joshi, 2005).
24 The current study used data collected in the first three waves (i.e., 9 months, 3 years, and
25 5 years of age). All data were collected during home visits and informed consent was

obtained from primary caregivers, typically the mothers. Ethics approval for the primary MCS was obtained from the South West Multi-Centre Research Ethics Committee and the London Multi-Centre Research Ethics Committee.

Measures

Outcomes

Conduct problems were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at 3 and 5 years of age. The SDQ was originally normed for children from 5 to 18 years of age (Goodman, 1997; Goodman, 2001); however it has been used and validated with samples as young as 3 years of age (Theunissen, Vogels, de Wolff, & Reijneveld, 2013). The conduct problems scale included five items: (1) often has temper tantrums, (2) generally obedient (reverse coded), (3) fights with or bullies other children, (4) can be spiteful to others, and (5) often argumentative with adults. In the current sample Cronbach's alpha was .82 and .78 at 3 and 5 years respectively. Parents were asked to report on a three-point scale whether items were (0) *not true*, (1) *somewhat true*, or (2) *certainly true*. Items were summed to create a score for each child that ranged between 0-10 with higher scores indicating more conduct problems. In a cross validation of the individual scales of the SDQ, children scoring above the 90th percentile on the conduct problems scale had a mean odds ratio of 15.2 of an independent psychiatric diagnosis for conduct or oppositional defiance disorder, thus demonstrating the predictive validity of this scale (Goodman, 2001).

Children's language was assessed using the British Ability Scale (BAS), a standardised assessment used for children and adolescents from 3 to 17:11 years of age (Elliott, Smith, & McCulloch, 1996). The BAS early years battery is comprised of six

1 core scales measuring children's verbal ability, non-verbal reasoning ability, and spatial
2 ability. Support for the construct validity of the BAS verbal ability scales was derived in
3 part from the large association with the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of
4 Intelligence-Revised verbal scale (i.e., .83; Elliott, Smith, & McCulloch, 1997). In the
5 current study the standardised score of the naming vocabulary scale was used at both 3
6 and 5 years of age as a measure of children's expressive language. The naming
7 vocabulary scale required children to identify and define objects. Cronbach's alphas for
8 the naming vocabulary have been reported as .86 and .65 respectively (Elliott, Smith, &
9 McCulloch, 1997). In the current sample Cronbach's alpha was .95 and .59 at 3 and 5
10 years respectively.

11 **Covariates**

12 Children's cognitive ability was assessed at 3 years of age using the Bracken
13 School Readiness Assessment - Revised (BSRA-R; Bracken, 2002), which has been well
14 validated in the literature (e.g., Panter & Braken, 2009). The BRSA-R is a standardised
15 measure of intelligence normed for children aged 2:6 – 6:11 years of age. A composite
16 standardised score from the six scales measuring nonverbal cognition (i.e., colors, letters,
17 numbers and counting, sizes, comparisons, and shapes) was utilised in the current study.
18 Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .89

19 Children's hyperactivity/inattention was assessed at 3 years of age using the
20 Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. The hyperactivity/inattention scale included five
21 items (e.g., restless, overactive, cannot sit still long, constantly fidgeting or squirming),
22 which were summed to create a score for each child ranging from 0-10, with higher
23 scores indicating more problems. Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .81.

Aspects of parenting behaviours were assessed using parent reports and inventories collected during the home visits when children were 3 years of age. Harsh parenting was assessed using parent report. Items came from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus & Hamby, 1997) and included (1) smack child if being naughty, (2) shout at child if being naughty, (3) send child to bedroom/naughty chair, (4) take away treats if child is naughty, and (5) tell him or her off if being naughty. Parents reported on the frequency of these items as (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *once a month*, (4) *once a week or more*, and (5) *daily*. A composite score was then created from the five items. Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .92.

Positive parenting was measured during the home visit using items taken from the Infant Toddler- HOME (Caldwell & Bradley, 2001). A trained interviewer recorded the presence or absence (yes/no) of each item which included (1) mother's voice is positive, (2) mother converses at least twice with child, (3) mother answers child's questions verbally, (4) mother praises child spontaneously, and (5) mother caresses or kisses child. A composite score was then created from the five items. Cronbach's alpha was .99.

Finally, maternal depression was assessed using eight items that specifically focused on depressive symptoms from the larger Rutter Malaise Inventory (Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970), an overall measure of psychosocial distress. Maternal reports were collected in the first wave of the study when the infants were 9 months old. Mothers reported on the presence or absence of each item. Example items included (1) felt sad or low, (2) depressed, (3) tired most of the time. A composite score was then created from the eight items. Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .84.

Statistical Analysis

1 Cross-lagged modeling was employed in the current study. While causality cannot
2 be directly inferred, the use of cross-lagged models is advantageous as it enables the
3 examination of multiple paths without imposing assumptions of directionality (Kenny,
4 1975; Selig & Little, 2012). Further, the use of cross-lagged models is particularly
5 valuable when testing developmental models where change may be expected as the
6 inclusion of the auto-regressive paths partials out previous variance (e.g., Y_2 from Y_1),
7 thus the cross-lagged predictions are estimated from residual variance (Selig & Little,
8 2012). Cross-lagged paths then take into account the initial level of the outcome
9 construct, reducing the likelihood that effects observed across time are merely the result
10 of correlated X_1 and Y_1 variables. To the best of our knowledge, with the exception of
11 one study examining physical aggression and language ability (Girard et al., 2014), no
12 studies to date have examined the associations between children's conduct problems and
13 expressive language using cross-lagged models as compared to multiple regression
14 analyses that inherently impose directionality regarding the associations. Two models
15 were estimated in the current study. The first model estimated the auto-regressive,
16 concurrent, and cross-lagged associations between conduct problems and expressive
17 language at 3 and 5 years of age. In the second model, the same paths were estimated
18 after regressing control variables on both conduct problems and expressive language
19 ability at 3 years of age. As the model became saturated when controls were regressed at
20 age 5, this model was excluded.

21 The fit indices presented for each model include the chi-square test, the root mean
22 square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993), the standardised root
23 mean square residual (SRMR; Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2000), and the comparative

1 fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990). The RMSEA and SRMR are presented as a result of the
2 high likelihood of obtaining a significant chi-square test with very large sample sizes
3 such as in the current study (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). It has been suggested
4 that a RMSEA between .05 to .08 indicates good to adequate fit and .08 to .10 indicates
5 mediocre fit (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). For the SRMR, equal to or lesser
6 than .05 represents a good model fit (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2000; Hu & Bentler,
7 1999). The CFI was also presented as it has been found to be among the fit indices that is
8 least affected by sample size (Fan, Thompson, & Wang, 1999). Hu & Bentler (1999)
9 have suggested equal to or greater than .95 as representing a good model fit.

10 Cross-lagged models were estimated using Mplus version 6.11 full information
11 maximum likelihood (FIML; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2011) to account for missing data.
12 Full information maximum likelihood is advantageous as it is a more unbiased method
13 when handling missing data (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Standardised betas (β) are
14 presented as an estimate of effect size. We adopted a more stringent statistical threshold
15 ($\alpha = .001$ instead of .050, see Johnson, 2013) due to the large sample size involved.

16 Due to saturation in the first model and extremely poor fit indices, the concurrent
17 path at 5 years was removed. Fits for the two models, without and with covariates were
18 good to acceptable, $\chi^2(5) = 7892.79, p < .001$; RMSEA = .052; RMSEA CI₉₀ = 0.039-
19 0.067; SRMR = .011; CFI = .99, and $\chi^2(30) = 33294.05, p < .001$; RMSEA = .087;
20 RMSEA CI₉₀ = 0.084-0.091; SRMR = .044; CFI = .95, respectively. Post-hoc two-group
21 models were also estimated to examine possible differences between boys and girls,
22 however these were not presented, as the associations in each model were similar to the
23 one-group models.

1 Results

2 The descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for conduct problems and
3 expressive language are presented in Table 2. All correlations were in the expected
4 direction whereby higher conduct problems were associated with lower expressive
5 language. Additionally, the bivariate correlations among covariates are presented in Table
6 3.

7 Conduct Problems and Expressive Language

8 Cross-lagged model without controls.

9 Auto-regressive (e.g., from conduct problems at 3 years to conduct problems at 5
10 years), concurrent (e.g., between conduct problems and expressive language at 3 years),
11 and cross-lagged paths (e.g., from conduct problems at 3 years to expressive language at
12 5 years) were examined. Results of the first model are presented in Figure 1. Auto-
13 regressive standardised paths revealed medium statistically significant positive
14 associations for both conduct problems and expressive language from 3 to 5 years of age.
15 The statistically significant auto-regressive paths support initial conduct problems being
16 predictive of future conduct problems and similarly that early expressive language is
17 predictive of later expressive language. The concurrent standardised path between
18 conduct problems and expressive language at 3 years of age was also statistically
19 significant, suggesting that children who were rated higher on conduct problems at 3
20 years of age also performed more poorly on expressive language assessments at this age.
21 Two statistically significant cross-lagged associations were also identified, although the
22 magnitude of these associations were small. That is, poorer expressive language at 3

1 years was associated with increased conduct problems at 5 years and higher conduct
2 problems at 3 years was associated with poorer expressive language at 5 years.

3 **Cross-lagged model with controls added.**

4 Following the results obtained with the first model, we then tested a second model
5 controlling for variables that have been previously implicated in studies of both conduct
6 problems and language development. All controls were regressed on both conduct
7 problems and expressive language at 3 years only to avoid saturation of the model.
8 Results of this model are presented in Figure 2. Auto-regressive standardised paths for
9 both conduct problems and expressive language remained statistically significant. The
10 initial concurrent path between conduct problems and expressive language at 3 years of
11 age was no longer statistically significant, however a concurrent negative association was
12 found at age 5. The initial cross-lagged paths from expressive language at age 3 to
13 increased conduct problems at age 5 and the cross-lagged path from conduct problems at
14 age 3 to poorer expressive language at age 5 both remained statistically significant.

15 When sex was regressed on conduct problems and expressive language at age 3,
16 no statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls for either.
17 Children's nonverbal cognition at 3 years was negatively associated with conduct
18 problems and positively associated with expressive language. Hyperactivity/inattention at
19 3 years was found to be positively associated with conduct problems, but not with
20 expressive language. With respect to parenting behaviours, no statistically significant
21 associations were found with expressive language. However, harsh parenting was
22 positively associated with conduct problems and positive parenting was negatively

1 associated with conduct problems. In addition, maternal depression at 9 months was
2 positively associated with conduct problems.

3 **Discussion**

4 The current study aimed to provide a clearer understanding of the directional
5 associations between conduct problems and expressive language during a period when
6 language is rapidly developing and conduct problems are beginning to emerge (e.g.,
7 Caultield, Fischel, DeBaryshe, & Whitehurst, 1989). Overall, the results with a large
8 population-based sample support only modest reciprocal associations between conduct
9 problems and expressive language that are already present between 3 and 5 years of age.

10 Results from the first model revealed statistically significant auto-regressive,
11 concurrent, and cross-lagged associations, supporting both the stability and reciprocity of
12 conduct problems and expressive language over this two-year period. The sizable
13 estimates of effect in relation to the auto-regressive paths are important as they suggest
14 that the individual differences for each construct change only moderately over time. From
15 a developmental perspective, the relative stability of language and conduct over time with
16 moderate changes might be expected based on previous work examining trajectories in
17 both domains (e.g., Lee, 2011; Shaw, Lacourse, & Nagin, 2005). However, long-term
18 maladaptation is not necessarily evident given that certain conduct related behaviours in
19 the first 5 years are normative and that the first 4 years are characteristic of large
20 variation in communicative language learning (Alink et al., 2006; Hoff, 2005). That these
21 paths show congruency though would suggest that children who experience early
22 problems in either domain may continue experiencing problems if remediation efforts are
23 not available. Thus, in the context of these findings it could be recommended that parents

1 pay particular attention to toddlers who display high levels of conduct related behaviours
2 or who are late to reach particular developmentally appropriate milestones with respect to
3 expressive vocabulary production. Both of which may be indicators of continued
4 problems into the schooling years and necessary of potential remediation efforts.

5 The statistically significant cross-lagged associations in both directions, albeit
6 modest, support previous studies with older children suggesting that children who
7 struggle with early language acquisition are more likely to engage in higher levels of later
8 conduct problems (e.g., Aro, Eklund, Nurmi, & Poikkeus, 2012; Brownlie et al. 2004)
9 and studies suggesting that children with elevated levels of conduct related problems are
10 at increased risk of poorer subsequent language acquisition (e.g., Giddan, Milling, &
11 Campbell, 1996). While unidirectional associations have more commonly been reported,
12 this is likely due to the choice of statistical tests used (e.g., hierarchical regression) and
13 sample characteristics (e.g., predominantly boys, older, and sub-clinical or clinical levels
14 of either conduct or language impairment). Because parameters were not set a priori to
15 impose restrictions on possible directions of association in our models, the results favour
16 reciprocal paths between conduct problems and expressive language ability in a sample
17 with characteristics generally representative of the overall population within the UK born
18 during the new Millennium. The magnitude of both standardised cross-lagged estimates
19 however remains small.

20 The minority of previous studies that have used large population cohorts have also
21 found modest effects (Dionne et al., 2003; Girard et al., 2014; Oliver, Dale, & Plomin,
22 2004). Thus, our results are in line with the previous literature. It is possible that during
23 the early stages of vocabulary development, a slower rate of acquisition may not have as

1 detrimental effects on the emergence of conduct problems prior to school entry as
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4 1 opportunities for social interactions with peers, while starting to increase, may still be
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6 2 limited. Frustration that arises from a reduced ability to express needs and communicate
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8 3 may then be subsequently less prevalent during this time, resulting in the modest effects
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10 4 observed in the current study. Alternatively, given that particular conduct behaviours
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12 5 such as tantrums are relatively normative and decrease from toddlerhood to age 5, the
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14 6 impact on language learning across this particular two-year period may only have a
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16 7 minimal impact. Despite the modest magnitude of associations, the mutually influential
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18 8 negative impacts of conduct problems towards expressive language and vice versa would
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20 9 suggest that if remediation efforts are in fact needed, they should target skill development
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22 10 holistically, across both social and cognitive domains in early childhood.
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31 12 It is also possible that within a general pediatric population, associations may be
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33 13 more reflective of a parallel rather than predictive process partially explaining the modest
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35 14 effects (Girard et al., 2014). For example, the cross-lagged model including covariates
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37 15 revealed direct effects of maternal depression, harsh parenting, positive parenting,
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39 16 children's nonverbal cognition, and hyperactivity/inattention on conduct problems.
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41 17 Additionally, direct effects of nonverbal cognition on expressive language were found.
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43 18 The initial concurrent association between conduct problems and expressive language at
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45 19 3 years was no longer statistically significant when covariates were included, suggesting
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47 20 that parenting behaviours or within-child factors are more influential for the emergence
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49 21 of conduct problems in particular in the first 3 years of development. Based on the two-
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51 22 wave design of our study, we are not able to further examine the possibility of a
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53 23 mediation model. For instance, it is possible that harsh parenting may influence increased
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1 conduct behaviours through modeling or alternatively, parents with children who engage
2 in elevated conduct behaviours may resort to the use of more harsh discipline. Future
3 work should strengthen the current study by testing for mediation effects rather than just
4 controlling for the direct effects of covariates.

5 While our results suggest that other factors may play a larger role in the initial
6 emergence of conduct problems in particular and to a lesser extent towards poorer
7 expressive language in the first 3 years, the emergence of problems in one domain can in
8 fact negatively impact upon the other across time. Inferences surrounding causal paths
9 should however be cautioned. As previously highlighted, there is a scarcity of studies that
10 have examined these associations prior to entry into formal schooling using population-
11 based samples. The majority of studies conducted with older clinical samples have found
12 more support for an association in the direction of language difficulties to subsequent
13 behaviour problems (Beitchman et al., 2001; Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000; Brownlie
14 et al., 2004; Camp, Zimet, van Doorninck, & Dahlam, 1997). Thus, the results of the
15 current study add to the literature by suggesting that in the early years, the direction of
16 association may present differently in population samples (i.e., reciprocal and possibly
17 parallel rather than unidirectional). The results also revealed a modest significant
18 concurrent association between conduct problems and expressive language ability at 5
19 years suggesting that this association may stabilise once formed if no remediation efforts
20 are implemented. However, replication is needed with studies examining the associations
21 from toddlerhood into later childhood to better understand the stability of these
22 associations and whether directionality changes over time or whether increases in effect
23 sizes might be observed.

1 **Limitations of the Present Study**

2 Although this study used one of the largest available datasets during early
3 childhood, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, there were no behaviour or
4 language measures collected prior to age 3. Given the findings at 3 years of age, it may in
5 fact be possible that these associations were present earlier in the lifecycle. Investigating
6 the associations in the second year of life when conduct problems start to emerge and
7 when children's language is rapidly developing could be a direction for future studies.
8 This would provide additional insight on the issue of directionality from an earlier age.

9 Second, our model could not be extended beyond 5 years of age as wave 4 of the
10 MCS (7 years of age) utilized the word reading scale of the BAS rather than the naming
11 vocabulary scale that was used in waves 2 and 3. Unfortunately, no measure of
12 expressive vocabulary was collected during wave 4. From a developmental perspective,
13 future studies should examine the associations more longitudinally (e.g., from
14 toddlerhood to adolescence) to uncover whether changes in the magnitude or the
15 direction of associations are observed. Further, this would create a more comprehensive
16 understanding of studies that focus on the very early years and find modest associations,
17 as compared to studies utilizing older samples of children that find stronger effects.

18 Third, in the current study we focus on children's expressive language only.
19 While expressive language has been implicated in previous studies of conduct problems
20 and language development, this does not preclude the possibility that other areas of
21 children's language such as receptive and pragmatic language may also play contributing
22 roles. Future work should assess multiple areas of language to examine which types of
23 language are most strongly implicated in the early years of development.

1 Fourth, the internal consistency of the expressive language scale at age 5
2 borderlines on acceptable (i.e., Cronbach's alpha of .59); similar to that reported in the
3 manual for this age group. One of the greatest challenges in using a measure with a low
4 internal consistency is that any association found is attenuated by the reduction of the
5 maximum observable correlations between variables (Schmitt, 1996). Thus, the path from
6 increased from conduct problems at 3 years of age to poorer expressive language at 5
7 years of age in the current study may in fact be underestimated. Some caution is
8 warranted in interpreting this path of association before replication using alternative
9 measures is conducted.

10 Fifth, we are limited in our ability to draw firm conclusions with respect to the
11 direction of associations regarding parenting styles that were implicated in the model.
12 The ways in which parents interact with their children is a dynamic process influenced by
13 both internal characteristics of the parent and by the temperament and behaviour of the
14 child. While our results reveal that maternal depression, positive, and harsh parenting
15 exert influences on conduct problems, the exact mechanism driving this association
16 cannot be inferred given the study design. Ideally, it would be advantageous to collect
17 measures of parent interactions at multiple assessment points throughout children's
18 development and more specifically prior to the first assessment of conduct problems and
19 language ability.

20 Finally, due to model saturation, we were unable to regress covariates on age 5
21 conduct problems and expressive language. While the assumption of stationarity could be
22 made with respect to the covariates used, further longitudinal studies are needed that
23 include more assessment points over time which would allow for the ability of additional

1 paths to be examined. This would provide a clearer understanding of whether or not
2 parenting or within-child factors continue to, or differentially effect the observed
3 associations over time.

4 **Overall Conclusion**

5 Overall the results of the current study with a large population birth cohort
6 suggest that between 3 and 5 years of age, both early conduct problems and expressive
7 language difficulties can impact negatively on the emergence of the other over time,
8 albeit modestly. The results also indicate that the associations found between conduct
9 problems and expressive language abilities are impacted upon through direct effects of
10 external factors such as parenting behaviours, children's nonverbal cognition and
11 hyperactivity/inattention; particularly with the case of conduct problems and to a lesser
12 extent expressive language. Further studies utilizing large population-based samples are
13 needed that collect assessments of children's behaviour and language abilities at least by
14 12 months of age and after 5 years of age through to adolescence to provide a more
15 comprehensive developmental understanding of the associations. Additionally, these
16 studies should collect measures of parenting behaviours in the first year of life to provide
17 more insight regarding the possible mediating role of parenting behaviours. Finally, the
18 need for experimental studies that are better able to assess causal associations between
19 conduct problems, language development, and parenting are warranted.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Original MCS and Families Included in the Current Study

Employment:	Initially recruited (N = 18, 553)	Included in the current study (N = 14, 004)
Employed at 9 months	36.00%	47.02%
Marital Status:		
Single	42.70%	31.17%
Married	49.74%	61.80%
Separated/divorced/widow	7.28%	6.97%
Ethnic group (% non-white):	22.41%	15.57%
Highest academic		
Higher degree	2.45%	3.55%
First degree	7.34%	13.57%
Diploma in higher education	5.69%	9.07%
A/AS/S Levels	7.64%	9.67%
O Level/GCSE grades A-C	32.85%	33.51%
(GCSE) grades D-G	11.38%	10.52%
Other academic qualification	4.21%	2.55%
Maternal Age	28.1 (6.03)	30.0 (5.90)

Note: All variables collected when infants were 9 months. GCSE grades D-G is approximately equivalent to having less than a high school diploma in the US education system; O level GCSE grades A-C is an exit qualification from high school taken at 16 years of age however does not qualify the holder to attend university; A/AS/S levels is comparable to a high school diploma; Diploma in higher education is approximately equivalent to a two-year college degree; First degree is approximately equivalent to a four-year college degree; Higher degree is approximately equivalent to a graduate/professional degree.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Conduct Problems and Expressive Language

	Conduct Problems 3 years	Conduct Problems 5 years	Expressive Language 3 years	Expressive Language 5 years
Conduct Problems 3 years				
Conduct Problems 5 years	.49			
Expressive Language 3 years	-.17	-.16		
Expressive Language 5 years	-.15	-.15	.56	
Mean	2.53	1.52	49.46	54.62
Standard Deviation	2.06	1.51	11.35	10.82

Note: All correlations significant at $p = < .001$

Table 3

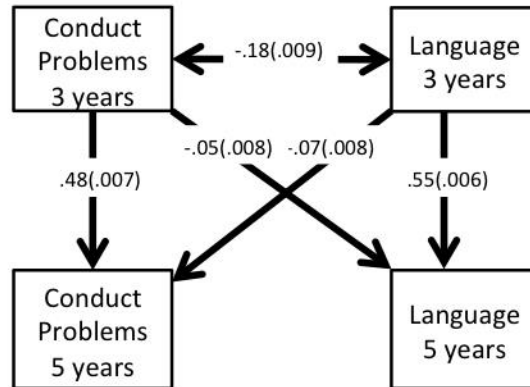
Bivariate Correlations among Parenting Behaviours and Within Child Factors

	Harsh Parenting	Positive Parenting	Maternal Depression	Cognition	Sex
Harsh Parenting		NS	.27***	.02*	-.09***
Positive Parenting	NS		-.06***	.17***	NS
Maternal Depression	.27***	-.06***		-.07	-.02**
Cognition	.02*	.17***	-.07***		.13***
Sex	.09***	NS	-.02**	.13***	

Note: * Significant *p* value at < 0.05 level, ** Significant *p* value at < 0.01 level, *** Significant *p* value at < 0.001 level.

1 **Figure 1**

Crossed-Lagged Model: Conduct Problems and Expressive Language
(3 to 5 years)



2

3 Note: Cross-lagged model examining the direction of associations between conduct
 4 problems and expressive language ability. Full information maximum likelihood used.
 5 All associations significant at $p = < .001$. Standard errors presented within brackets.

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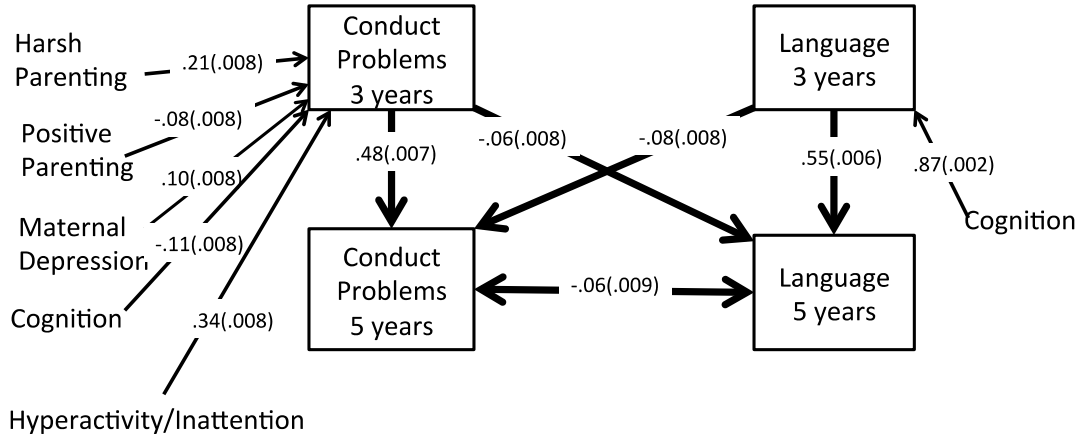
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1 **Figure 2**

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10 **Crossed-Lagged Model with Controls: Conduct Problems and Expressive Language**
11 **(3 to 5 years)**



2

3 Note: A cross-lagged model of the directional associations between conduct problems
4 and expressive language controlling for covariates. Full information maximum likelihood
5 used. All associations significant at the $p = < .001$ level. Only statistically significant
6 associations are presented although all covariates were regressed on both conduct
7 problems and expressive language at 3 years. Standard errors presented within brackets.
8 Maternal depression was collected when infants were 9 months. All other control
9 variables were assessed when children were 3 years of age.

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