
The Role that Family Structure, Parenting Styles and Relational Modernity Plays in Preventing Juvenile Offences

When searching for ways to prevent juvenile offenses, it is crucial to take into consideration parenting styles, relational modernity, and family structure as a whole. Parents play a key role in the development of an adolescent, and negative experiences can prove to be harmful in this development. Is there any way that juvenile delinquency can be prevented or lessened with parental intervention?

In the case of David O., we see a fifteen-year old boy with a tumultuous relationship with his parents. This relationship was littered with neglect, abuse, and abandonment. He lacked the “security, love, and other emotional bonds” (Singer 59) that would have helped him to deal with any troubles he had during his adolescence. This adverse upbringing may have contributed to David’s violent murder of his eight-year old neighbor. What could have been done to prevent this offense? Could relational modernity have played a key role? Had David had a better relationship with his parents, this crime may never have occurred at all. More involvement in David’s life could have led his parents to see the warning signs and intervene at an earlier date. The ability to see the problems that David was facing would have allowed his parents to take action before his issues further escalated. Looking into different styles of parenting, there is a need to address how a parent’s involvement in their child’s life may influence or deter them from delinquency. There is also a need to be critical of exactly how influential this relationship is on the creation of delinquency. It is not fair or accurate to place the entire blame of an adolescent’s offense on the parents. While they may play a role in the development of the juvenile leading up until this point, there are also factors and circumstances beyond the parental influences. This leads to the question of what interventions would have been successful at leading David away from this delinquency. There are an array of interventions that could have been an option given an early recognition of David’s problems, from therapy to removal from the home. It is important to think in terms of what would have been most beneficial to David given his detrimental home environment. Looking at different types of intervention, we can speculate on what would have been most successful in preventing David’s brutal act of violence.

Integration of References:

When looking at reasons for juvenile offending, it is important to take into consideration the adolescent’s relationship with their parents. Parenting style, supervision, and involvement, among other factors, directly impact a child’s development. Negative experiences and

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exposures can be detrimental to adolescents and can lead to delinquency. There are many studies attempting to solidify the relationship between different parenting factors and juvenile delinquency. While there have not been many conclusive findings, there is a lot to be extrapolated from the research.

Different parenting styles have been shown to be associated with higher levels of delinquency, but there wasn't a significant relationship (Wittenborn 9). Permissive parenting and authoritarian parenting do correlate to higher levels of delinquency than authoritative parenting. Permissive parenting, which can either be indulgent or neglectful, can be harmful in the development of a child. The low parental care often seen in this type of parenting is "related to high levels of distress in adolescents" (6). This neglect, as seen in the case of David O., can lead adolescents to experience these negative feelings.

Many studies have shown that while permissive and authoritarian parenting may affect the rate at which juvenile delinquency occurs, there are many other factors that have a stronger correlation. These include parental supervision, parental rejection, and parent-child involvement. Parental rejection, often seen in cases of neglect, is a strong predictor of juvenile delinquency. Those who experience parental rejection often adopt a more troublesome disposition and are then more likely to be rejected by their parents (Wright i). This creates a cycle that escalates with time, leading to further delinquency. The rejection by a parent is seen to be more deterministic of a child's likelihood of delinquency than the parenting style itself.

In response to neglectful parenting, we can look at the importance of relational modernity or the concept of "how trouble in adolescence is recognized not just by the youth themselves but also by the adults in their lives" (Singer 85). There is a need for adults who can recognize the trouble that adolescents are experiencing in order to prevent these troubles from escalating into delinquency. In order for there to be early intervention in regards to juvenile offending, adults must play a key role. This recognition of adolescents' troubles is crucial in getting juveniles the help that they need, be it family intervention, therapy, or another form of treatment. Adolescents themselves are often not independent enough to seek help or treatment on their own. This intervention must be catalysed by an adult who recognizes that the juvenile needs help.

When it comes to family issues in relation to juvenile delinquency, there are many possible routes of prevention and intervention that could take place. If one were attempting to keep a child in their current home, a possible intervention strategy would be family therapy. Many aspects of family dysfunction are important influences on future delinquent and antisocial behavior in adolescents. Studies show that "severe and inconsistent discipline consistently predict later delinquency and substance use/abuse" ("Family Therapy" 1). In order to intervene in regards to this idea of severe and inconsistent discipline, family therapy may be beneficial. This therapy could be directed at discipline tactics within the family amongst other issues. The

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improvement of family functioning as a whole has been shown to “reduce problem behaviors in adolescents from dysfunctional families” (1). There are many different types of family therapy, but there are a few that may be more helpful than others in the case of David O. One such type is structural family therapy which is focused on families’ coping skills and learning new ways to respond to issues within the home. This therapy places more importance on the structure of the family instead of the individual’s problem, signifying that “the problems of an individual get amplified because of the structure and communication within a family” (Structural Family Therapy 1). This type of therapy can be advantageous to juveniles with delinquency problems in that it attacks the bigger issue at hand. Going beyond individual problems, this therapy looks at the family structure. The family influences all areas of adolescent development, therefore reinforcing the benefits of this intervention treatment.

Another intervention that could be valuable in preventing juvenile delinquency would be the use of Child Protective Services. Taking into account the risk factors associated with adverse parenting in regards to the likelihood of delinquency, recognizing and removing a child from a detrimental situation would work to alleviate that. There is the obvious need for a recognition of the trouble going on in a home in order for Child Protective Services to become involved. While some may argue that removing a child from their home would cause further disruptions, it’s important to think of how it would affect a child in an extremely unfavorable home environment. Thinking in terms of permanency planning, it is arguably more important for a child to be in a stable and safe home as quickly as possible than to work to keep the child in their current home with their biological parents. When it comes to cases of abuse and neglect, the impact of an outside adult is crucial in helping the child get out of the dangerous situation.

David O. review:

David O.’s parents neglected him from a young age, treating his siblings with more attention. In David’s own words, he “felt worthless and was told this frequently. [He] subsequently believed that [he] was no good.” (Reasons for Offense 1). This type of negative feedback combined with a lack of attention created a space for David to act out in order to try to get his parents to take notice of him. As David stated, he was the worst behaved out of his three siblings, presumably in an effort to get this attention that he so desired. This created a cycle similar to the one mentioned by Wright in Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker’s Guide to the Literature. David reacted to his parents’ neglect by acting out which then led to him being further rejected by his parents. This was the perfect cycle to allow for the creation of his delinquent behaviors.

David’s parents exhibited a parenting style that was a combination of authoritarian and permissive. Authoritarian parents are “often strict and unfair in punishing their children” (Wittenborn 5). As David recalled in his written statement, the entire family was “verbally

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abused and discipline was generally handed out with a belt, extension cord, or a 1x2 board” (Reasons for Offense 1). This extreme punishment is seen in this style of parenting, often combined with a lack of emotions in regards to their children. David’s parents also showed some attributes of permissive parenting through the neglect that he was shown. His parents seemed to operate on a binary of parenting styles, with his father being more authoritarian and his mother being more permissive.

David O. had a lack of relational modernity throughout his adolescence. His relationship with his father was lacking at best and was often full of abuse. There was often strict abuse and discipline seen in David’s description of how his mother tried to protect his two siblings from the maltreatment. David’s relationship with his mother, on the other hand, was neglectful and resulted in him being separated from her when his parents divorced. He experienced severe abandonment when this occurred, exacerbated by the fact that his mother took custody of his two siblings but sent him to live with his father. David stated that at the time he felt “rejection, betrayal, alone and unloved” (Reasons for Offense 2). Beyond just his relationship with his parents, David also had strained relationships with other adults, attributing to this lack of relational modernity. The other main adults in his life were his abusive stepmother and his abusive minister. Those adults who may have had a chance at producing relational modernity, mainly his grandfather and uncle, died while David was still young. David was devastated by their passing and said that they were his only two friends. These two adults had the closest and healthiest relationship with David but were unable to have a large enough impact on his life given their deaths. Their passing early in David’s childhood was another form of abandonment in David’s eyes. His only two friends and the adults most likely to be able to recognize the trouble in David were no longer a part of his life.

Before David’s ultimate offense, he started committing small crimes. He began stealing and acting out in school in order to “get any kind of attention” (Reasons for Offense 7). David believed that these small offenses would bring his father back to him. David recognized that when he misbehaved his father punished him and then followed that punishment with some kind of attention, “probably from guilt on his part” (7). David’s misbehavior was a cry for help and attention from his father. Had there been any relational modernity there, his father would have recognized this cry and been able to intervene earlier. The ability to acknowledge the troubles that David was having would have allowed him to help his son. In cases of abuse and neglect, thinking about relational modernity is difficult. How could parents who are so damaging to their children be able to help them when they are having problems? David was in desperate need of an adult who recognized the trouble that he was experiencing and would help him overcome those troubles. While David grew up in a good community, it wasn’t “enough to make up for parental neglect” (Singer 251). The impact that a parent has on a child is pivotal in that child’s development and it is often underestimated.

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There is the obvious need to address what could have been done to prevent David O. from offending. Could certain prevention or intervention programs have benefited him? In regards to the issues of relational modernity, several of these programs may have worked to prevent his crime. One example of an intervention that may have alleviated the issues David faced at home would be family therapy. Had the removal of David from the home not been an option, therapeutic treatment could have helped to alleviate the issues that he faced with his family. While individual therapy would also be effective, there is an importance in tackling the family as a whole. David's poor parenting and lack of relational modernity attributed greatly to his crime. Specifically looking at structural family therapy, this intervention would have benefited both David and his family. It focuses on coping skills and "learning new ways to respond" ("Family Therapy" 3). As seen in David O.'s written statement, he often acted out in an attempt to garner attention from his parents. Had his parents been taught how to respond to this rebellion, there would have been an opportunity to interrupt the cycle that Wright mentions in regards to a feedback of detrimental behavior and the following reactions on the part of the parents. Parental training is crucial in general when knowing how to respond to adverse adolescent behavior.

Another early intervention program that may have been beneficial is the involvement of Child Protective Services. Had CPS been aware of the abuse and neglect that David faced at home, their involvement may have led to his removal from that negative environment. While it is of course impossible to know what may have followed after his removal, one can only speculate that being displaced from his abusive home would be advantageous to his physical and mental wellbeing. In reference to permanency planning as aforementioned, David may have benefited more from being removed from his abusive environment and placed in a safe and stable home as quickly as possible. There is definite merit in wanting a child to remain in their home, but in the case of David O., the abuse and neglect was so detrimental to his development that removal from the home may have helped him considerably. It is easy to say in hindsight that "David O. should have been removed from his abusive home environment" (Singer 249). He needed other adults to intervene where his parents were causing damage.

Critical Assessment/Discussion/Conclusion:

Parenting styles and relational modernity play a key role in a child's development. Negative parental influences and experiences can be detrimental in this development and lead to negative outcomes later in the child's life. In the case of David O., we see a child who experienced many destructive exposures that helped lead him to killing his eight-year old neighbor. His parents' neglect, his mother's abandonment, and the lack of relational modernity in his life set David up for failure. David was a troubled youth with a negative home environment, but no one recognized the troubles that he was experiencing. David was rejected at home and this led to him acting out in small ways at first, later leading to his act of violence. Without an adult to recognize the troubles that he was having, David received no intervention.

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There are several programs or treatments that may have been successful in deterring David from this crime. Be it family therapy, removal from his home, or another intervention, there were many missed opportunities to prevent this offense from happening. Further insight is needed in seeing what other interventions could work to prevent juvenile delinquency. There is a need for more research to be done in order for there to be stronger support for these interventions. Knowing the benefits and influences that different treatments and programs have is vital in being able to deter juveniles from delinquency.

Parenting styles can influence a child's development in many ways. There are four main parental characteristics that have been identified as being associated with a child developing antisocial personality, a development that is associated with problem behavior. Two of these characteristics, lack of supervision and lack of discipline, are seen in permissive parenting. The other two, lack of emotional support and rejection, are seen in authoritarian parenting. David was subject to several of these parental characteristics as he was raised with both a permissive and authoritarian parenting style. There is strong evidence supporting the importance of these parental factors in the development of a child and their proclivity for problem behavior. In the case of David O., these played a vital role in creating the opportunity for his delinquency and violence. Further research must be done to see how these different parenting styles affect adolescents and how interventions can work to alter this trajectory.

Can a family have such a drastic affect on a juvenile's development and their likelihood of delinquency? It is of course easiest to say what could have been done after the fact of an act of violence. It's crucial for us to recognize the limitations of the interventions that have been proposed in hindsight. We will never know if family therapy or removal from the home would have prevented David from brutally murdering his neighbor. Perhaps there were other factors outside of the family that lead to this crime, but looking into his detrimental home life, there is obvious support that these types of interventions would have dramatically altered David's development and therefore deterred him from this crime.

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