Handbook of School Violence and School Safety
International Research and Practice
Shane R. Jimerson, Amanda B. Nickerson, Matthew J. Mayer, Michael J. Furlong

Coercion and Contagion in Family and School Environments

Publication details
Gregory M. Fosco, Jennifer L. Frank, Thomas J. Dishion
Published online on: 05 Dec 2011

How to cite: Gregory M. Fosco, Jennifer L. Frank, Thomas J. Dishion. 05 Dec 2011, Coercion and Contagion in Family and School Environments from: Handbook of School Violence and School Safety, International Research and Practice Routledge
Accessed on: 28 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
Coercion and Contagion in Family and School Environments
Implications for Educating and Socializing Youth

Gregory M. Fosco and Jennifer L. Frank
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Thomas J. Dishion
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON, EUGENE

Abstract

This chapter discusses the peer processes of coercion and contagion and their implications for public school efforts to educate and socialize youth. The systemic link between coercion in the family and in the classroom and deviant peer contagion is considered developmentally in terms of an ecological framework. Research has shown that in elementary school, aggressive behavior, normative peer rejection, and academic failure lead to formation of self-organized deviant peer groups by secondary school. Such peer groups provide a basis for the development of premature autonomy, which in turn can present a serious challenge to parents and teachers to recover or influence educational and social outcomes. These processes are described in respect to school settings, with a focus on application of a coercion model to the classroom and on contagion processes that emerge from aggregating problem youth. Preventive implications for family–school partnership are then discussed.

When one considers that by early childhood time spent with peers exceeds time spent with parents (Ellis, Rogoff, & Cromer, 1981), it is not surprising that peers are a core influence on social–emotional development and learning in the school environment (Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007). Even in kindergarten, children’s imitation of deviant behavior with their playmates predicts later antisocial behavior (Snyder et al., 2005). Peer rejection by fourth grade is prognostic of adult lifestyles characterized by antisocial behavior, even after controlling for adolescent antisocial behavior and academic achievement (Nelson & Dishion, 2004). Research on peer influence has commonly focused on externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and substance use, yet deviant peers present risk for depression (Stevens & Prinstein,
self-infl icted injurious behavior (Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008), poor academic achievement (DeBaryshe, Patterson, & Capaldi, 1993), and disordered eating (Crandall, 1988).

Focus has shifted from the links between deviant peer relationships and negative outcomes to the processes by which deviant peers affect child and adolescent developmental trajectories. Two processes have a consistent, yet distinct, impact on problem behavior: coercion and contagion. *Coercion* is an interpersonal, dynamic exchange during which aggressive behavior is used to escape, reduce, or avoid an aversive experience by means of escape conditioning or reinforcement (e.g., Patterson 1982). Common examples of coercion include tantrums, contesting sanctions with anger or aggression, and threats, posturing, or physical aggression. When a parent rescinds a sanction or directive, the child’s aggressive behavior is reinforced, making it more likely to reoccur. Likewise, when the child terminates the aggressive behavior, it is reinforcing to parents, and they are more likely to acquiesce in the future and even cooperate before aversive behavior begins. These routine coercive interactions can shape children’s aggressive behavior into a core strategy for getting their way.

*Contagion* generally describes a mutually influential peer process in which shared behavior or emotional patterns are amplified through aggregation and mutual reinforcement. A core mechanism is *deviancy training*, which is an interpersonal dynamic of reinforcing deviant talk and behavior (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996). It involves sharing stories of deviant acts, encouraging peers to engage in deviant acts, and participating in storytelling about deviant acts.

To understand the peer dynamics underlying externalizing trajectories, one must move beyond simple univariate models of risk and protection to consider child risk factors and contextual influence on development. This complex interplay is captured in ecologically based theories (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dodge & Pettit, 2003) that recognize that (a) child and context influence development in direct and interactive ways, and (b) multiple complex environments and relationships that form within these contexts affect children’s development. In this chapter we discuss developmental processes in deviant peer relationships, as well as key family and school contextual influences that promote or amplify problem behavior.

### Deviant Peer Processes

Recent findings by Snyder and colleagues (2008) provide observational evidence that coercive behavior and deviancy training coexist as distinct processes that begin as early as age 5. Both processes guide youth in the same direction: escalating antisocial behavior.

Childhood coercion includes teasing, threats or verbal attacks, and shoving or hitting as a means of getting one’s way (Snyder et al., 2008). Getting one’s way through aversive means can socialize aggressive behavior over time. Snyder and colleagues (2008) found that kindergarteners who engaged in coercive behavior with their peers showed increased overt aggression by age 8. This pattern is exacerbated because coercive youth are commonly rejected by prosocial peers, which can lead the rejected children to affiliate with other aggressive children (Vitaro, Pedersen, & Brendgen, 2007) and eventually form deviant friendships that further escalate problem behavior into forms of serious violence (see Figure 6.1) (Dishion, Véronneau, & Myers, 2010). In spite of the repellant nature of aversive behavior, it appears that contagion processes function as a core foundation for deviant friendships. Deviant talk among problem youth is an organizing feature of the friendship, and the duration of deviant talk episodes in such friendships predicts uniquely the amplification of problem behavior in adolescence (Granic & Dishion, 2003). Although the friendships are not of high quality, the common ground of violating norms explains why deviancy training is such a powerful predictor of problems, and thus serves as a strategy to form and maintain significant relationships in their lives.
Family Contributions to Deviant Peer Influences

A more complete picture of deviant peer influence emerges when one considers how the family context shapes early involvement with problem peer groups and contributes to the maintenance of deviant friendships and peer contagion. Two key family processes are understood to reinforce deviant peer processes: coercive family processes and premature autonomy. Family processes are the product of a bidirectional interaction over time: parenting shapes child behavior, and child behavior has a significant impact on the quality and effectiveness of parenting. Parenting practices and parental well-being are contextualized within a constellation of factors, including economic hardship (Conger et al., 1992), single parenting (Dodge et al., 2009), interparental conflict (Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2007), and parent depression (Conger, Patterson, & Ge, 1995), all of which compromise one’s ability to parent effectively.

Coercion

Coercive processes in family relationships are typically characterized by aversive, aggressive child behaviors in response to harsh and inconsistent parenting and density of punishment rather than praise or positive parenting (Dishion, Patterson, & Kavanagh, 1992). Coercive parenting is likely to include sudden and “explosive” discipline (Patterson, 1986), noncontingent negativity regardless of child behavior (Dishion et al., 1992), and physically attacking one’s child (Dishion et al., 1999). Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey (1989) have referred to family coercion as “basic training,” meaning that coercive parent–child exchanges can directly train children to engage in coercive and antisocial behaviors outside the home as well, such as with peers and teachers (Dishion et al., 1992). Using aggressive means to get one’s way with peers is a coercive strategy that is linked with increases in problem behaviors in later development (Snyder et al., 2008). Youth from coercive homes are typically drawn to aggressive peers and are at greater risk for rejection from normative peers (e.g., Dishion et al., 2010), making them particularly vulnerable to the influences of other problem youth. Ultimately, all these processes increase a child’s risk for a wide range of enduring problems with aggression, violence, substance use, and risky sexual behavior (Dishion & Patterson, 2006; Dishion et al., 2010).
**Premature Autonomy**

The pace at which adolescents are given freedom and successfully engage in self-monitoring without assistance from their parents is critical for their well-being. Consistent supervision, guidance, and connectedness with caregivers facilitate positive youth development and minimize the likelihood of deviant peer influences (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Fosco, Stormshak, Dishion, & Winter, in press). When supervision remits too early and too quickly, youths can become disengaged from their families and experience freedom and unsupervised time in excess of what is developmentally appropriate, a process called *premature autonomy* (Dishion et al., 2004).

When parents use monitoring and supervision to stay informed about their youth’s activities and behavior, they also provide structure to his or her environment (Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Hoeve et al., 2009) and decrease the likelihood of deviant peer affiliation and outcomes, such as substance use and delinquent behavior (Hoeve et al., 2009; Laird, Criss, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2008). Recent findings suggest that, after accounting for parental monitoring, parent–adolescent connectedness is a unique protective factor for youth (Fosco et al., in press) that provides an context in which adolescents to value their parents’ opinions and seek guidance for difficult situations (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006). Parents can then help their adolescent cope with pressures to conform to peers and instead make good decisions about relationships with peers. It is not surprising, then, that disengagement from parental monitoring and family relationships is a significant risk factor for a wide range of problems, including early-onset substance use, disrupted education, delinquency, depression, bullying, and suicide attempts (Ackard et al., 2006; Dishion et al., 2004; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003).

**Integrating Family and Peer Developmental Processes**

Dodge and colleagues (2009) proposed a broad developmental framework in which mutually influential and transactional dynamics across individual, peer, and family domains account for developmental processes that progress toward substance use initiation by the end of high school. Family contexts characterized by sociocultural risk, such as low socioeconomic status and single or teenage motherhood, were associated with family risk factors such as conflict, low father involvement and support, harsh parenting, and exposure to family and neighborhood violence. In turn, high-risk family environments in early childhood predicted child behavior problems in kindergarten, which were followed by peer difficulties in third grade. Problem peer relationships and deviant peer association were associated with less parental monitoring and supervision by age 11, as were early family risk factors. Problematic peer relationships in sixth and seventh grades were predicted by early peer rejection and by low levels of parental monitoring. In turn, adolescent deviant peer relationships mediated the effects of behavior and parenting problems on substance use initiation by 12th grade. Clearly, family and peer contexts are inseparably linked in the progression of problem behavior and peer deviance.

**School Contributions to Deviant Peer Influences**

Like families, schools represent an important natural setting for development. Most research has focused on how peer-group affiliation affects school functioning; far less is known about the specific ways in which the school environment affects the formation and function of student peer groups. Although concepts such as coercion and contagion are useful constructs for understanding the mechanism of prevention and intervention effects, few have considered how these processes operate within the context of school-based interventions (Reinke & Herman, 2002; Reinke & Walker, 2006). Broadly speaking, school environmental factors consist of schoolwide, classroom, and individual student systems. Following is a review of existing literature about each
of these levels and an overview of the ways in which the application of these concepts may prove useful.

**Schoolwide Factors**

Schoolwide systems typically affect student behavior and peer group activity indirectly by establishing behavioral norms and structures within which individual students and peer networks evolve. Schoolwide programming that couples clear rules and expectations with predictable student reward structures sets prosocial norms and helps reduce problem behavior in schools (Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998). This programming is a key component of a variety of schoolwide prevention programs, including Unified Discipline (White, Algozzine, Audette, Marr, & Ellis, 2001) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) models; in two randomized, controlled trials (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Horner et al., 2009), both programs were found to be effective. For implementation to be effective, rules and expectations must be observable, measurable, and developmentally appropriate (Mayer, 1995). It is helpful to link explicit rules to common procedures and routines (e.g., transitions) and specific areas (e.g., hallways, bathrooms) in which problematic student behavior or peer interactions arise (Colvin, Sugai, Good, & Lee, 1997; Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 2000). Schoolwide rules and expectations also shape teacher behavior so that it is consistent and predictable in response to student misbehavior (Nelson, Martella, & Galand, 1998). Although it has yet to be empirically established, this approach may also prove to promote and reinforce positive peer networks.

A common approach to addressing problem behaviors in schools is to create special classroom environments or groups for problem students. Although such practices may be efficient, research has clearly documented that the aggregation of students with behavior problems is linked with enduring increases in aggression and problem behavior over time (Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998; Warren, Schoppelrey, Moberg, & McDonald, 2005). Likewise, group-format interventions for high-risk middle school youth have been found to lead to increases in delinquent behavior and substance use three years later (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999).

**Classroom-Level Factors**

At the classroom level, microenvironment practices related to student grouping, instruction, classroom management, and the dynamics involved in reciprocal teacher–student interactions have been demonstrated to shape student behavior and peer networks (Van Acker, Grant, & Henry, 1996; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Research consistently points to the role of effective instruction and classroom management in the prevention of problematic behavior, student disengagement, and formation of disruptive student cliques (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Clearly, student disengagement promotes off-task behavior. Students who are off-task are inclined to recruit others to do the same, thus cycles of coercion and contagion develop during instructional tasks. By differentiating instruction and evenly distributing opportunities for students of varying abilities to respond to instruction, teachers promote task engagement and reduce the occurrence of problem behaviors (Gunter & Sutherland, 2005).

Coercion may prove to be a useful framework for examining the mechanisms through which troublesome classroom behavior and problematic teacher–student interactions arise and are maintained. The model illustrated by Figure 6.2 posits that the coercive cycle begins when teachers respond in a negative, coercive manner to student noncompliance or off-task behavior. Students respond by intensifying their behavior. Teachers may escape the situation by withdrawing their initial request or reducing task demands. Consistent with an escape conditioning model, disruptive students receive less academic instruction and fewer task demands (Walker...
et al., 1995). When students escape task demands in this fashion, the effects on learning and behavior are twofold: first, the student’s misbehavior is reinforced and thus is likely to persist and strengthen over time. Second, the student’s opportunities to learn are reduced and potential for achievement is compromised. Reductions in students’ rate of learning and achievement, in turn, primes students to engage in noncompliant and off-task behaviors during instructional activities, thus perpetuating the cycle.

Only a handful of investigators have applied this particular theoretical model to the study of teacher–student interactions, but the effects of coercion have been documented across a number of common instructional settings (Gunter & Coutinho, 1997; Gunter et al., 1994). Shores and colleagues (1993) found that aggressive behaviors of children with emotional–behavioral disabilities can have a negative effect on the extent to which teachers interact with children. Nelson and Roberts (2000) extended this work by studying patterns of teacher–student interactions during problematic classroom behavior in general education settings. Their work revealed that interactions between students and teachers regarding problem behavior remained fairly stable over time and were not significantly influenced by contextual factors, such as time of day, academic content, or teacher proximity. As is the case with parent–child interactions, this stable dyadic process is self-sustaining and often resistant to change. Coercive processes affect not only the quality of teacher–student relationships, but may compromise the quality of instruction and academic achievement over time. Research examining the effects of student behavior on instruction have consistently found that students who exhibited more problem behavior were less involved in academic interactions with teachers and were typically provided less, and less effective, instruction than were students who did not exhibit problem behavior (Carr, Taylor, & Robinson, 1991).

Understanding and disrupting maladaptive coercive cycles in the classroom is important for the well-being of students and teachers. Teachers under stress may less effectively respond to student misbehavior in a noncoercive manner, are generally less tolerant of challenging student behavior (Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005), and are significantly more likely to report having negative relationships with their students (Yoon, 2008). A continuing cycle of coercive exchanges may also prevent students from accessing the protective benefits of positive teacher–student relations, which are a consistent predictor of school and overall behavioral adjustment (Pianta,
Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Teachers who “provide emotional support, reward competence, and promote self-esteem” help decrease the vulnerability of high-risk students when they are responding to stressful life events (Werner, 1990). Conversely, conflict and dependency in teacher–student relationships are associated with unfavorable outcomes, such as a negative school attitude, school avoidance (Birch & Ladd, 1997), and hostile aggression (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994). Thus helping students at risk establish and maintain positive relationships with adults at school is key to risk reduction and to promoting a positive learning environment.

The Good Behavior Game (Barrish, Saunders, & Wolf, 1969; Medland & Stachnik, 1972) is a good example of a relatively simple behavior management program. When a behavior in the classroom is identified as a problem, for example, the entire group has an opportunity to be rewarded if the behavior terminates. This program was found to have substantial long-term prevention effects (Poduska et al., 2008) when it was used as a universal intervention in public school classrooms in high-risk communities. The game can also be used by families: days when a problem behavior is absent represent opportunities for reward (Dishion & Patterson, 2006). Schools and families can cooperate on structuring tasks and settings to optimize student success, teach self-regulation skills, and reinforce successful coping and avoidance of coercive exchanges. These classroom-management intervention programs that systematically alter “business as usual” in regular classroom settings hold promise for reducing the conditions that give rise to coercive exchanges and peer contagion.

Individual Student-Level Factors

School personnel may disrupt deviant peer processes indirectly by implementing prevention programs or curricula, embedding social–emotional learning (SEL) content into school practices, and defining the nature of extracurricular and after-school activities. Although most prevention programs target individual outcomes, many also are used to shape the formation and function of student peer groups. For example, the Botvin Life Skills training program (Botvin, 2000) has been shown to reduce problem behavior and the popularity of middle school students with deviant behavior (Osgood, Feinberg, Gest, Moody, & Bierman, 2010). Other programs that use risk awareness or resistance skills training strategies (e.g., Gang Resistance Education and Training [GREAT] or Drug Abuse Resistance Education [DARE]) have had mixed results (Flay, 2009; Pan & Bai, 2009).

Other comprehensive approaches, such as SEL, promote core social competency skills by helping students learn to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively (CASEL, 2010; Payton et al., 2000). SEL is a broad approach to promoting mental health and resilience that uses curricular planning to teach social, emotional, and life skills and prevent negative life outcomes (Payton et al., 2000). These broadly applied SEL curricula help students develop skills and internal cognitive and affective processes necessary to achieve specific social behaviors and positive peer interactions across a range of contexts (McCombs, 2004). SEL has been shown to be effective for decreasing conduct problems, substance use, emotional distress, school dropout, and attendance problems (Benson et al., 2000; Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004), and in one study, prompted an 11% increase in standardized test scores (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Not surprisingly, cost analyses have revealed that universal SEL implementation results in a substantial return on investment (Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, Pennucci, 2004). As such, these comprehensive approaches provide a promising framework for delivering consistent and sustained messages and shaping a school culture that discourages formation of maladaptive peer networks.
Bridging Home and School Contexts: School–Family Connections

Coercion and contagion are parallel processes that have similar implications for intervention across home and school contexts. Both require effective behavioral management so that youth are not placed at risk for deviant peer influences, and so unsupervised interactions do not place youth at risk because of disengagement from parental supervision or aggregation of problem youth. The question is, how does one intervene after deviant peer cliques are established? Currently, the best approach to reducing deviant peer influences is to target risk factors that may lead at-risk youth to aggressive behavior, social rejection, and academic disengagement. At school and at home, effective and consistent response to disruptive behavior is critical for reducing youth aggression that precipitates social rejection and involvement in deviant peer relationships. Key strategies to reduce contagion effects are to structure unsupervised time and bolster parental monitoring (Laird et al., 2008).

From an ecological perspective, there is little question that home and school settings are interdependent contexts of development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consistent with this view, evidence suggests that when youth perceive good coordination between home and school, they are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, including violence, substance use, and suicidality (Resnick et al., 1997). In two randomized, controlled trials we found that implementing the Family Check-Up model in schools as a family-centered intervention to target behavior management and monitoring was more effective than “school as usual” for decreasing problem behavior (Connell, Dishion, Yasui, & Kavanagh, 2007), increasing school attendance, and improving grades (Stormshak, Connell, & Dishion, 2009). From this perspective, we offer five recommendations for bridging home and school contexts to effectively reduce risk for deviant peer processes (Table 6.1).

First, we recommend creating consistent rules at home and in school that clearly define acceptable behavior. In both settings, strong communication and consistent expectations for student attendance, behavior, and academic performance are critical to ensuring that children’s best interests do not get lost in the process (Dishion & Kavanagh, 2003). Youth perceptions of consistency across these contexts are linked with lower risk (Resnick et al., 1997).

Second, consistent and predictable positive reinforcement for good behavior must follow in order to eliminate coercive processes. Moreover, communication between home and school about a student’s positive behavior facilitates additional positive reinforcement (e.g., parents rewarding student success at school) and also informs parents and teachers about which positive behaviors to watch for.

Third, it is important that teachers and parents become aware of youths’ coercive processes at school and at home and learn how to disrupt the cycle to reduce youth risk. Coercion is likely getting started when teachers and parents (a) hesitate to give sanctions, (b) yell or threaten punishment in an attempt to make a child listen to directives, (c) tend to focus on negative behavior,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.1 Implications for Practice: Preventive Approaches to Reducing Risk for Deviant Peer Influences by Connecting Home and School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Common rules at home and school that are clearly stated in both settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Consistent, predictable positive reinforcement for good behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Awareness of the power of coercion, use of effective behavior management strategies at home and school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Structure, monitoring, and supervision at home and school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Communication and coordination among parents in the community, facilitated through schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Structuring of peer social networks to reduce coercive peer grouping.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and (d) feel intimidated by the child. Coordination between school and home about how to effectively short circuit this dynamic by using effective requests and reinforcement of positive behavior can be key to reducing coercive processes in both settings.

Fourth, home and school communication must be used to bolster monitoring and supervision so that exposure to contagion effects is reduced. A collaborative effort must be made to increase structured time at school, increase communication so that parents are better aware of who their student is spending time with and when they are likely to be unsupervised, and help parents create plans for engaging students in supervised activities or for structuring after-school time until parents are home and able to supervise.

Fifth, school personnel can facilitate parental monitoring by helping establish parenting networks. To promote a network of parents who work effectively together to supervise their youth, school personnel can provide a venue for parents to share contact information, establish parent meetings about how to track adolescents’ whereabouts, and promote parent networking in respect to after-school events (e.g., sporting events, school dances). Parent networking can be a critical strategy for learning information that adolescents may withhold, for ensuring that youth activities are appropriate, and for sharing family rules about issues such as curfew, “checking in,” and unsupervised time.

Sixth, school personnel could more actively “design” peer environments that reduce rejection and self-organization into deviant peer clusters, bearing in mind that schools are a key influence in the formation of peer social networks. Rejection by the normative peer group and self-organization into deviant peer clusters together contribute to amplification of problem behavior throughout adolescence (Dishion et al., 2010). Research on social networks reveals that some schools are more strongly characterized by peer contagion dynamics than are others (Light & Dishion, 2007), suggesting that some schools are better than others at managing the peer learning environment. For example, the classic study by Feldman revealed that systematically integrating prosocial and antisocial boys reduced the effects of peer contagion (Feldman, Wodarski, Goodman, & Flax, 1973). The field would benefit from a data based (i.e., social network data) approach to assigning youth to classrooms, learning activities, lunch periods, and extracurricular activities, with a goal of reducing peer contagion and improving education and social outcomes.

References


Coercion and Contagion in Family and School Environments


