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Reward, impulsivity and parental self-control as antecedents of self-control in children

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Abstract: Self-control is, definitely, a trait which influences the whole personality, the development and the wellbeing of children. The aim of the present study is to investigate the role of parental self-control, parental impulsivity and reward granting in forming children's self-control. The participants were 334 Romanian adolescents, who reported on parental self-control, parental impulsivity and reward granting in forming their self-control. The research is based on a quasi-experimental design, with self-reported questionnaires, applied in groups. The results suggest that parental self-control influences children's self-control and also the quality of the parent-child relationship. Reward granting mediates the relationship between parental impulsivity and child self-control. The article brings further support for the idea that parents' actions and manifest personality qualities have a significant effect on children's level of self-control.

Keywords: self-control, reward granting, parental self-control, parental impulsivity, child self-control

Introduction

One of the most significant skills that children can acquire in early childhood is self-control. A self-controlling child can, definitely, better manage behaviors, emotions and thoughts (Oaten, & Cheng, 2005). High levels of self-control implies that children already acquired the ability to follow rules and to inhibit immediate desires (Muraven, & Baumeister, 2000). Self-control predicts a variety of desirable behaviors and influences the quality of relationships and the well-being at middle age (Pulkkinen et al., 2011, Marici, 2014a). It predicts adaptive skills (Stormshak et al., 2000), it reduces delinquent and aggressive behaviors (Gramzow et al., 2000) and increases emotional regulation (Carlson, & Wang, 2007). High levels of self-control were associated with prosocial behaviors and positive psychological outcomes. One crucial benefit of children

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with high levels of self-control is that it allows them to behave prosocially, even when not monitored by parents (O'Leary, 1979).

Research suggests that child self-control is influenced by the level of parental self-control, and the fact that parents control their impulses and focus on their established goals helps children delay rewards and manifest high levels of patience (Patock & Morgan, 2006). High parental self-control predict less parental impulsivity (Hamilton et al., 2014) and these parents are also able to use a more diverse array of techniques to train children to control themselves (Forzano et al., 2011). The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of parental self-control and parental impulsivity on children levels of self-control, taking into consideration the potential mediating role that reward granting has in this relationship.

Conceptualizing and Developing Self-control in Children

Self-control refers to a process of growth, through which the individual learns to endure pain and to delay gratification, in the face of the demands and obstacles of life (Buker, 2011). In the *General Crime Theory*, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) show that *low self-control* has six characteristics: risk predisposition, preferences for simple physical activities, non-verbal communication, lack of vision, volatile behavior and impulsivity (Grasmick et al., 1993). In addition, low self-control is associated with 'irritable and depressive moods' (Febbraro, & Clum, 1998), substance use, delinquency (Ezinga et al., 2008), sexual promiscuity (Nofziger, 2008), and it amplifies negative emotional states (Kanfer, 1970), aggression and violence (Avakame, 1998), and lack of honesty (Mead et al., 2009).

The way self-control develops in early childhood (the first three years) could be a predictor for negative behaviors, in next stages of life (Moffitt et al., 2011). Self-control is basically formed during childhood, it is shaped along adolescence, and its effects are seen the whole life (Caspi et al., 1989). It stays relatively stable during one's lifetime (84% respondents reported relatively stable levels of self-control), and only a small percentage of individuals report a significant change in its level, over time (Hay, & Forrest, 2006). This indicates that self-control has a *window of development* and it is crucial to practice and to acquire it, at the most optimal period in life.

What is more, developing self-control is the result of a large array of factors such as: parental socialization, educational factors, teachers' attitude in teaching and parents' personal involvement. It is supposed that self-control offers children situations in which they can develop intrinsic motivation, and practice impulse control, in order to acquire behaviors centered on personal goals (Buker, 2011). Self-control reflects individual belief to behave in line with personal principles, in spite of environmental influences (Bandura, 1977).

Impulsivity and Self-Control

The inhibition of behaviors depends on the level of control the individuals exert on environmental stimuli. Impulsivity reflects a tendency for acting without control over impulses and action rapidly, without sufficient reasoning about future consequences (Moeller et al., 2001). Self-control implies impulse control. Impulses are more difficult to inhibit and require greater concentration and effort than desires, for example (Hay, 2001).

Many researchers regard self-control as *a conscious effort* to prevent the negative impulses that influence decision-making at the behavioral level (De Ridder, 2012). Decisions made under the power of the present moment can divert the individual's attention from the central objectives. Some impulses manifest as drives without conscious intentions and effort. However, dealing with these impulses is thought to require *conscious intention* and *personal motivational resources*. The idea that pulse-inhibiting effort requires cognitive resources is supported by contemporary research, showing that people are more likely to fail to manifest self-control, when cognitive resources are *low* or *absent*, as compared to the situation when the individual is *cognitively resourceful* (Hofmann et al., 2009).

Then, self-control requires sufficient energy resources, which need to be focused to achieve the desired goal. Research on personal exhaustion shows that self-control is given by limited energy resources (Baumeister, 2018). Once this resource is exhausted by an act of self-control, there is less available resources to feed the next 'temptation'. This resource exhaustion process makes people easily fail in a later situation that require self-control, that is unrelated to the previous ones (Baumeister et al., 1994).

Impulsivity is also often conceptualized as a lack of self-control, in a lot of child or adult disorders (Spira & Fischel, 2005, Gomez, 2003), such as: hyperactivity disorder, substance abuse, borderline personality disorder (Champan et al., 2008), impulse-control disorders, or dependency problems (Alessi, & Petry, 2003). Impulsivity is associated with a preference for easier and immediate benefits, over large and later rewards (Hamilton et al., 2014). Self-control judgements are oriented on important decisions for individuals and not on immediate and often unearned rewards (Stein et al., 2013). *Then*, viewing through the eyes of impulsivity or self-control, rewards seem very subjective. This is a process of 'devaluation' known as *delay discounting*. Subjects who wait more (are more self-controlling) select smaller rewards, while subjects who wait less (are less self-controlling) select larger rewards (Madden, & Johnson, 2010).

Association between Parents' and Children's Self-control

Self-control in children can be understood as a static reality, measured on a scale from *low* to *high*, but it can also be referred to as an interactive process between parents and children (Horn et al., 1990).

The *authoritative parenting model* of Baumrind (1967), or the *model of parental socialization* proposed by Bandura (Patock-Peckham et al., 2001; Patock, & Morgan, 2006) indicate that parents' behaviors and abilities determine children's conduct and skill levels (Turliuc, & Marici, 2013). In other words, low levels of self-control in parents is a significant predictor of children's inability to acquire high levels of self-control (Finkenauer et al., 2005).

Parents' dysfunctional behaviors such as psychological control, verbal aggressiveness, corporal punishment, physical aggressiveness, negative communication, or negative problem solving skills hinder and negatively interfere with self-control development in children (Avakame, 1998). Children learn self-control when they deal with *contexts* in which their ability to delay gratifications is exercised. Such opportunities include practices such as *rules setting, monitoring,* or *discipline* (Unnever et al., 2003, Marici, 2014b). In addition, children learn from their parents only when parents are perceived to be models to follow and are *close*, *familiar* and they *like* them.

Reward Granting and Self-Control

The way in which parents promote or inhibit children's responses will influence the development of children's self-control abilities. Children feel freer to express their emotions, make decisions, and take responsibility for their own actions, when parents are warmer, more receptive and more expressive (Botiș et al., 2007). Self-control requires prioritization according to 'importance', meaning that *immediate* behaviors must be subordinated to *valuable* ones. But, less valuable behaviors are generally more appealing, because they are followed by immediate rewards. Rewards make immediate actions more attractive, and often important remote actions, which have attached later rewards, seem less attractive.

Studies have shown that the ability to train children's self-control can increase patience. This shows that exercises done by teachers and parents, by delaying rewards increase children's ability to manage the extrinsic stimuli. As a result, children who have been constantly exposed to such planned delays will have a higher level of self-control. This helps individuals manage their behaviors and change their perception about the cognitive representations of rewards (Mischel et al., 1989).

Researchers show that parents play a decisive role in parent-child relationships owing to their control-exerting techniques (Meldrum et al., 2015). In order to develop self-control, parents have to constantly carry out some actions: monitor the behaviors of their children, recognize deviant behaviors, sanction behaviors a. s. o. Thus, regardless the approach, parents must take into account the 'affection' and the 'control' dimensions (Gottfredson, & Hirschi, 1990, Buker, 2011).

In addition, cognitive-behavioral techniques, which focused on behavioral modification aim at sanctioning undesirable behavior and rewarding desired behavior. This way, children will be inclined to do more and more of the *rewarded behavior* and give up the *punished behavior* (Rothbaum et al., 1998). Criminology underlines that parenting practices, referring to family structuring such as child discipline, significantly correlate with variations in children's self-control (Unnever et al., 2003), adolescents' self-control (Burton et al., 2003) and even adults' self-control (Gibbs et al., 2003).

Aim of the Current Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between parental impulsivity or parental self-control and children's self-control, as well as to test the mediating role of reward granting in this relationship. The present research aims at testing the following research questions: *H1*: Does 'parental self-control' influences children's level of self-control'? *H2*: Does 'parental impulsiveness' influences children's level of self-control'? *H3*: Does 'reward granting' mediate the relationship between 'parental self-control' and children's level of self-control'?

More precisely, we expect parental self-control to have an effect on children's level of self-control: the higher the level of parental self-control, the higher the level of child self-control. *Secondly*, we predict that there will be a significant negative effect of parent's impulsivity on children's level of self-control. In other words, the higher levels of impulsivity in parent-child relationship, the lower the level of self-control in children. *Finally*, we expect reward granting to mediate the relationship between parental impulsivity to child self-control.

Method

Participants

The research included 334 Romanian adolescents, aged between 10 and 17. Respondents were selected from 6 High Schools from Suceava County. 60.6% were from urban areas and only 39.4% from rural context. From the perspective of family characteristics, the collected data shows that adolescents come from families, which have between 1 and 14 children. In terms of family status, 89.7% had married parents, 4.9% of parents were divorced, 3.7% were widowed, and 1% of parents were living in concubinage. For 52% of the interviewed teenagers, both parents had an important role in their education, 39.1% said, that the mother had the most important role, for 4.9% fathers were the educational figure, and 3.3% reported that other people, such as a relative or a close friend had the most significant role in their education.

Data colleting

The research is based on questionnaires which were administered in groups, in the classrooms, at school. Schools and classes were randomly chosen. The principal of the schools granted us permission to perform the whole procedure and assisted us in deciding classes, establishing hours of testing or obtaining the written consent from parents, as respondents were minor. The average time for completing the questionnaires was 20 minutes.

Measures

Parental Self-control was measured with 15 items from Brief Self-Control Scale (Tangney, 2004), and it was defined as adolescent's perception of parental self-control. The items are measured on a five-point scale (1 - not at all like my parents, 2 – a little like my parents, 3 – some fit my parents, 4 – most of my parents and 5 - very much like my parents), and were of the following type: 'My parents are good in resisting temptations'. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.78.

Parental Impulsivity was assessed using a subscale of the *Murray Impulsivity Questionnaire* (Rawlings, 1984), which measures the perception of parental impulsivity. This subscale contents 6 items. The items are formulated as it follows: 'My parents often become impulsive just to get rid of them'. Teenagers answered questions on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all like my parents*) to 5 (*very much like my parents*). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.89.

To measure *Children Self-control*, we used the *Brief Self-Control Scale* (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Responses were based on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*much like me*), and the items were formulated as it follows: 'Pleasure and fun sometimes distract me from doing my job' or 'I'm capable of working hard to reach my goals.' Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.85.

Reward Granting was measured using a scale with 8 items (Pojoga, 2017). Respondents rated their answers on a scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*) and indicated whether their parents did the following in the last year: 'Reward me when I obey rules.' Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.84.

Results

Preliminary to testing the three hypotheses it was performed a Pearson correlation analysis in SPSS. The associations between the proposed variables are shown in *Table 1*. Results show (see *Table 1*) that adolescents who get high scores on the perception of parental self-control will also report high scores at their self-control. The correlation table indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between: adolescents' self-control and their perception of

parental self-control (p = .000, r = .213, N = 334). *Then*, the correlation between adolescent's self-control and reward granting shows that adolescents who achieve high scores in terms of reward granting will also get high scores in their self-control (p = .007, r = .147, N = 334). *What is more*, there is a significant negative correlation between adolescents' self-control and parental impulsivity (p = .004, r = -.155, N = 334). Adolescents who get high scores on their parents' impulsivity will report low scores on their self-control.

Table 1: The Pearson Correlation between the Main Variables in the Research

		Adolescent self-control	Parental self-control	Parental impulsivity	Adolescent rewarding
Adolescent self-control	r	1	.213**	-.155**	.147**
	Sig.		.000	.004	.007
	N	334	334	334	334
Parental self-control	r	.213**	1	-.455**	-.017
	Sig.	.000		.000	.755
	N	334	334	334	334
Parental impulsivity	r	-.155**	-.455**	1	-.147**
	Sig.	.004	.000		.007
	N	334	334	334	334
Adolescent rewarding	r	.147**	-.017	-.147**	1
	Sig.	.007	.755	.007	
	N	334	334	334	334

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), Sig. = 2-tailed, r = Pearson correlation coefficients.*

Then, in order to examine the hypotheses, we tested a theoretical model in AMOS. The presumed model is as follows (see *Figure 1*):

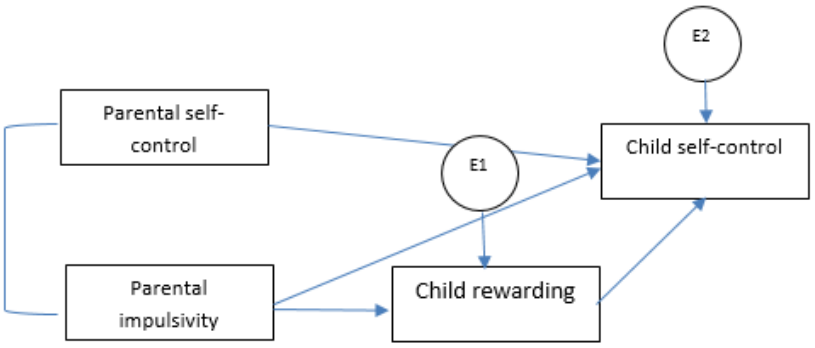

Figure 1. The Presumed Model in AMOS

For the statistical analysis we used Structural Equation Modeling for a manifest variable model. Firstly, it was performed a *chi square* test for the presumed model. The results are as it follows: $\chi 2$ (2, N = 334) = 3.6, p = .165, which shows that the observed and the trimmed models, are statistically identical. Model indicators show that the trimmed model is good: CFI = .985, GFI = .995, AGFI = .973, NFI = .968 (all are above .90) and RMSEA = .049 (which is below .05), within a confidence interval between .000 and .130. PCLOSE = .396, which is greater than .05. The path coefficients for the direct relations between variables in the trimmed model, are presented in Table 2, below. After the analysis, the relation between parental impulsivity and child self-control was dropped from the presumed model, because it was not significant.

Table 2: Standardized and Un-Standardized Regression Weights and Covariance for the Trimmed Model

	Standardized coefficient estimates	Un-standardized coefficient estimates	SE	CR
Parental self-control > Child self-control	.215	.269	.066	4.073
Parental impulsivity > Child rewarding	-.147	-.306	.113	-2.709
Child rewarding > Child self-control	.150	.086	.030	2.834
Parental self-control < - > parental impulsivity	-.455	-3.791	.502	-7.553

These results show that there is a positive relationship between parental self-control and children self-control. High levels of parental self-control is associated with a tendency to find higher levels of self-control in children. The first hypothesis is thus *confirmed*.

Moreover, parental impulsivity is negatively associated with children rewarding. A higher level of parental impulsivity will probably predict a lower rewarding strategy for children. The second hypothesis is *confirmed*. The model shows that there is a positive connection between children rewarding and children self-control. Rewarding of children predicts a higher self-control in children. In the present analysis we could not find any significant predictive association between parental impulsivity and children rewarding.

In order to find evidence for mediation in the model, we used the bootstrapping method to estimate the standard errors for un-standardized or standardized total effects and indirect effects. We asked AMOS to produce 3000 bootstrap samples, with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals, which would

also provide us with a test of significance for the indirect effect. The standardized indirect effect of parents' impulsivity on child self-control is -.022, with a standard error of .011. The p value for the indirect effect is equal to .011, which indicates that we have evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no mediation. Thus, we can say that the path from parental impulsivity to child self-control is mediated by child rewarding. This is a total mediation, as long as the direct path from parental impulsivity to child self-control is not significant. Thus, hypothesis number 3 is *confirmed* too.

Discussions

The aim of the present study was to test the influence of parental impulsivity and parental self-control on children's self-control and to test the mediation role of reward granting between parental impulsivity and child self-control. The results showed that all hypothesis were confirmed.

Parental qualities influence the development of children's self-control (Forzano et al., 2011). *Firstly*, when parents exhibit high levels of self-control children also report high levels of self-control. The explanation is provided by The *Social Learning Theory* which postulates that children learn in social interactions and through observation and imitation. Children imitate behavior by learning the sequence of steps to perform it properly, the reasons to do it, they acquire the internal motivation and the attitude attached to it. Thus imitation becomes a complex process of 'apprenticeship' in which children are *exposed* to the novel behavior, *observe* its components, and *implement* it, when the appropriate circumstances ask for it, *improve* the behavior and end up by assuming it, entirely and performing it *automatically*.

Secondly, parental impulsivity does not directly predict children's self-control, so the second hypothesis is infirmed, but it predicts through the mediation of child rewarding, thus the third hypothesis is confirmed. Although impulsivity is a negative behavior in parents, leading to negative outcomes, it does not directly determine the level of self-control in children. Impulsive parents could exhibit less impulsive moments in front of their children, because of their long abscesses in their families owing to life duties (i.e. long hours working, remote job, own business…) which could save children form become impulsive too (Sultan, 2012). *Quantity* of relationship and *timing* is important here. If parents are impulsive, but they do not have the chance to express their impulsivity constantly, in front of their children, children's underdeveloped self-control would not have a good chance to develop (Lorber, 1984). From this point of view future studies should compare how parental level of impulsivity varies as a function of family structure (*mono-parental family vs. dual parental family*) and how it influences children's level of self-control. One possible explanation could come from one-earner families, where very often mothers report less time spent with their children, more time working to earn money and

higher level of stress. Thus, impulsive mothers might not have enough time to sufficiently influence their children negatively, as children could be raised by extended families, if any available. In dual-earner families, parents could have a less powerful influence over their children, especially if parents have a dominating *permissive* educational style, which is characterized by less control, which might prevent children from learning self-control.

As the mediation of parental rewarding is significant, this implies that what children see form parental impulsivity is only their handling of rewards, and this is exactly what actually influences child self-control. The mediation is total, meaning that, according to our data, children become less or more self-controlling directly as a function of parental rewarding style mechanisms. Rewarding, when applied correctly, is a method that helps children learn how to manage desires and personal drives. Rewards are often combined with punishments and they together provide adequate training to children, regarding the formation of personal control abilities. Parents that use proper rule setting, set boundaries, formulate correct commands, use efficient discipline techniques are more effective at exhibiting self-control behaviors (Tao et al., 2014).

The results from this tested model show that parental rewarding is the key element that boosts children's self-control. Literature suggests that it is not enough to reward children as permissive parents do, unconditionally. It is the same important to reward children conditioned, based on *rules*. Some privileges are earned and the reward is given only after the conditions required by parents are met. Otherwise, rewarding would be a one-way gratitude, according to which children receive what they want without effort, work and time invested. Although this research did not include parenting styles as a variable, literature suggests that authoritative parenting style is characterized by a high level of control and support. This means that parents set rules, which implies that not everything is permitted and children have to wait, be patient and learn and exhibit self-control. Rewards that form self-control are those that are administered after the child accomplished the task or followed the rule, and not after expressing their desire to receive.

The purpose of the present research was to test the influence of 'parental impulsivity' and 'parental self-control' on children's level of self-control and the mediation of child rewarding between parental impulsivity and child self-control. Results indicated that parenting quality, especially the style in rewarding children, determines the level of children's self-control. All three formulated hypotheses were confirmed.

This research has some limitations. *Firstly*, the assessment of parental self-control was reported as the children's perception of parental self-control and the information was not obtained directly from parents, which could theoretically change the results. Thus, self-control assessed in this study could be the self-control manifested in the parent-child relationship. Future studies could pay

attention to the comparative research on self-control, from the children's and parents' perspective. *Secondly*, the data was collected using self-administered, standardized questionnaires, which could rise the problem of social desirability, as compared to other data collection methods. *Future research* should take into account some other variables, such as: parents' style in rewarding, time spent with children, quality of parent-child relationship or even the quality and number of educational influencers with role in child self-control development.

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