

GENDER, AGE, AND CHILDREN AT HOME INFLUENCE RISKY BEHAVIOR IN ADULTS

Janine M. Ray¹, Polina Kats-Kariyanakatte¹, Latrease R. Moore², & Kristine M. Jacquin³

¹Clinical Psychology Doctoral Student, Fielding Graduate University (USA)

²Alumna, Clinical Psychology, Fielding Graduate University (USA)

³Professor and Dean, School of Psychology, Fielding Graduate University (USA)

Abstract

Extant research in risk-taking and self-harm behaviors has indicated that gender, age, and certain socioeconomic factors are associated with risk-taking behaviors. Our study tested the connection between gender, age, having children at home, and risk-taking behavior among adults. We predicted that having children at home would be associated with reduced risky behavior for both women and men, but more so in women than men. More than 450 ($N = 454$) American adults (M age = 33.3 years, $SD = 11.9$) were recruited from Prolific. Participants identified as male (54.4%), female (45.4%) or transgender (0.2%). Ethnicity was self-identified as Caucasian/White (80.4%), African American/Black (7.7%), multiracial (4.4%), Latinx (4%), Asian/Asian American (3.1%), Native American or Alaskan Native (0.2%), and other (0.2%). Participants completed the Risky, Impulsive, and Self-Destructive Behavior Questionnaire (Sadeh & Baskin-Sommers, 2016) to measure engagement in various forms of risky behavior throughout their lifetime including illegal risky behavior and risky sexual behavior. Differences in illegal behavior, risky sexual behavior, and other types of risky behavior were found between men and women, $F(3, 441) = 9.09, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, with men reporting more risky behavior of all types. ANCOVAs were used to further assess the relationships between gender identity and having children (IVs) and total risky behavior and illegal behavior (DVs); age was covaried. Significant interactions between IVs revealed that male participants with children at home engaged in significantly more risky sexual behavior, $F(1, 441) = 4.24, p = .04$, overall risky behavior, $F(1, 441) = 3.89, p = .049$, and illegal behavior, $F(1, 441) = 3.59, p = .059$, than those without children at home. For women, there was no relationship between having children at home and risky behavior, illegal behavior, or risky sexual behavior. The results may inform parenting education and law enforcement.

Keywords: Gender effects, risky behavior, illegal behavior, risky sex, children.

1. Introduction

According to Trimpop (1994), risk-taking is consciously or unconsciously-controlled behavior where there is an uncertainty about: (a) outcome, (b) potential costs, or (c) potential benefit to the economic, physical, or psychosocial wellbeing for the self or others. Prior research suggested that adolescent and young adult males are more likely to engage in risky behaviors than females (Harris et al., 2006; Sohrabivafa et al., 2011). Important factors in risk-taking behaviors such as certain socioeconomic factors, like affordability and access to risky activities, have been identified (Asamoah & Agradh, 2018; Javier Garcia-Castilla et al., 2020; Sohrabivafa et al., 2011; Zahran et al., 2007). Sensation seeking among youths is another factor whereby youths seek to feel alive similarly to how social media influencers and celebrities present their lives as exciting (Branley & Covey, 2018). However, existing literature has focused primarily on adolescent youth (13-18) or young adult (19-24) college students (Asamoah & Agradh, 2018; Leigh, 2002; Pharo et al., 2011; Sohrabivafa et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to examine the association between gender, the presence of children at home, and engagement in risky behaviors among adults.

2. Adolescent and adult risky behaviors

As measured by the Risky, Impulsive, and Self-Destructive Behavior Questionnaire (RISQ; Sadeh & Baskin-Sommers, 2017), adult risky behavior can include alcohol use, risky sex, aggression, illegal behavior, self-harm, impulsive eating, gambling, and impulsive driving or spending. Given that these behaviors are dangerous, and can merit consequences, such as death or injury, relationship struggles, and financial or legal consequences, it is important to understand the factors involved, such as age, relationship status, gender, and presence of children at home, to inform parenting education and law enforcement. In the extensive literature available on risky behavior, males are often more likely to engage in the behavior than females (Wang et al., 2020). Further, age is a predictor of risky activities. Adolescent youths and young adults (19-24) in particular are more likely than older adults to engage in these behaviors which can in part be explained by neurodevelopmental factors (Vijayakumar et al., 2018).

2.1. Relationship status and risky behaviors

In previous research (Ray et al., 2021), we examined the connection between relationship status and risky behavior. In that study, we found that relationship status and gender were significant predictors of total risky behavior. Trends in the data indicated that men, particularly men living with a partner, engaged in more risky behaviors than other groups. These results extended prior research showing that males are more likely to engage in risky behaviors than females (Harris et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2020), yet now relationship status may be an important factor in the process. It may be that women in relationships assume socially responsible roles and men feel more privileged to engage in risky behavior (Stronge et al., 2019). In our research, men in the living-with-a-partner group were more likely to engage in risky behavior; conceivably, men exhibiting high levels of risky behavior are viewed as less suitable partners for marriage (Valentine et al., 2019). There remains a gap in the literature as to whether another type of relationship status – having children who live at home -- predicts adult risky behavior.

3. Children at home and risky behaviors

Whether the risky behavior of a parent can impact the wellbeing of children at home is lacking in research attention. However, when children are involved, parental risky behaviors can have wide ranging implications for the child. For example, having an incarcerated parent has numerous short- and long-term consequence for children, such as depression, aggressive behavior, hyperactivity, attention issues, withdrawal, obesity, asthma, migraine headaches, and hypertension (Dallaire, 2007; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Lee et al., 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Additionally, risky behavior on the part of a parent in a partnership can result in relationship conflict and emotional or physical violence. Children become susceptible to further instability, such as parent substance abuse and mental illness, impoverished living conditions, maltreatment, exposure to violence, and unstable housing (Lee et al., 2012; McCaskill, 2014). These outcomes, not surprisingly, are associated with youth risky behavior (Asamoah & Agardh, 2018; Pharo et al., 2011). Although the potential negative impact of parental risky behavior on children seems apparent, prior research has not examined whether parents with children at home are more or less likely to engage in risky behavior. Our research helped fill this gap by examining the association between having children at home and risky behavior in adult women and men. We predicted that having children at home would be associated with reduced risky behavior for both women and men, with a larger effect in women than men.

4. Method

More than 450 ($N = 454$) American adults (M age = 33.3 years, $SD = 11.9$) were recruited through Prolific. Participants identified as male (54.4%), female (45.4%) or transgender (0.2%). Ethnicity was self-identified as Caucasian/White (80.4%), African American/Black (7.7%), multiracial (4.4%), Latinx (4%), Asian/Asian American (3.1%), Native American or Alaskan Native (0.2%), and other (0.2%). Less than one-third (29.1%) had children at home. Participants completed an anonymous online survey that included a demographic questionnaire and the Risky, Impulsive, and Self-Destructive Behavior Questionnaire (Sadeh & Baskin-Sommers, 2016) to measure engagement in total risky behavior, illegal risky behavior, and risky sexual behavior throughout their lifetime.

5. Results

MANCOVA revealed differences in illegal behavior, risky sexual behavior, and other types of risky behavior between men and women, $F(3, 441) = 9.09, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, with men reporting more risky behavior of all types. Three ANCOVAs were conducted to further assess the relationships between gender identity and having children at home (IVs) and total risky behavior, risky sexual behavior, and illegal behavior (DVs); age was covaried due to significant correlations with risky behavior. As expected based on the MANCOVA, significant main effects were found for gender on total risky behavior, $F(1, 441) = 13.15, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, risky sexual behavior, $F(1, 441) = 4.73, p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, and illegal behavior, $F(1, 441) = 23.57, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. For each DV, men reported engaging in more risky behavior than women. In addition, a significant main effect was found for children at home on risky sexual behavior, $F(1, 441) = 5.11, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. The effect of children at home on total risky behavior approached significance, $F(1, 441) = 3.07, p = .08$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. For both DVs, having children at home was associated with more risky behavior. Children at home did not show a main effect for illegal behavior, $F(1, 441) = 1.85, p = .18$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

The main effects are better understood by examining interactions between gender and children at home. Significant interactions showed that male participants with children at home engaged in significantly more risky sexual behavior, $F(1, 441) = 4.24, p = .04$, overall risky behavior, $F(1, 441) = 3.89, p = .049$, and illegal behavior, $F(1, 441) = 3.59, p = .059$, than those without children at home. For women, there was no relationship between having children at home and risky behavior, illegal behavior, or risky sexual behavior.

Table 1. Association of Children at Home and Total Risky Behavior.

Variable	Children at home		No Children at Home		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Male	14.13	10.28	10.58	7.16	11.62	8.34
Female	9.95	6.60	9.53	6.05	9.65	6.20
Total	12.25	9.03	10.10	6.68		

6. Discussion

Overall, men with children at home reported engaging in more total risky behavior, illegal behavior, and risky sexual behavior compared to men without children at home. Given that risky behavior can have consequences, such as death or injury, financial challenges, relationship discord, legal issues, and health concerns, these actions can create instability and conflict in the home. Living situation destabilization and conflict that may include neglect or exposure to abuse can increase children's risk of engaging in risky behavior themselves. Limitations of our study are that less than one-third of the sample had children at home (29.1%, $n = 132$) and we are unaware of the specific ages, genders, and number of children the participants had. Additional research with larger samples of individuals with children living in the home will clarify our findings. The number of children at home and the ages and gender of those children may play a role in parents' choices about engaging in risk-taking behaviors. Further study with the inclusion of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and types of partnerships would elucidate further these initial findings by increasing inclusivity and resultant generalizability.

7. Conclusion

There is an adage that individuals can settle down or mellow out in their behaviors, including risky behaviors, with partnership, marriage, and family. The findings here suggest that this is not the case for men in our sample. Because the presence of risky behavior in a child's home by their parents can be a destabilizing factor and can lead to children reenacting the behavior in adolescence, it is important that these results inform policy, education, and social programs. For example, findings may support parenting-education programs, social service practices, and may inform law enforcement regarding the complexities involved in adult risky behavior.

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