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Emotional Abuse, Neglect Affect Adolescent Depression Differently by Gender, Ethnicity: Study Highlights Value of Differentiating Abuse from Neglect

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Emotional Maltreatment and Adolescent Depression: Mediating Mechanisms and Demographic Considerations in a Child Welfare Sample

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Research shows that physical and sexual abuse are risk factors for depression in adolescents. However, we know less about the differences between emotional abuse and neglect as critical risk factors in teenage depression. A new longitudinal study examined the depressive effects of these different types of maltreatment among a group of youth at risk of being maltreated. The study found that emotional abuse and neglect affect adolescent depression differently depending on gender and ethnicity.

The findings come from researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. They appear in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

“Emotional abuse and emotional neglect have different impacts on adolescent depression,” explains Joseph Cohen, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, one of the study’s authors. “Even though both types of maltreatment predict depression, they may predict depression for different reasons. Furthermore, female teenagers may be more sensitive to emotional abuse, while the impact of emotional neglect may differ based on the adolescent’s racial or ethnic identity. Understanding how different youth are affected by different parenting behaviors can lead to more personalized, trauma-informed interventions.”

Researchers used self-reports from 657 youth ages 11 to 14 years from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The youth were part of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a nationally representative longitudinal study to evaluate the outcomes of children who had Child Protective Services investigations for child abuse or neglect closed during a 15-month period beginning in February 2008 in the United States.

The teenagers were initially assessed on emotional maltreatment, relationships with peers (including feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction in relationships with other youth), school engagement (the extent to which students participated in the academic and nonacademic activities of school, and felt connected at school), and depression. They were assessed again 18 months and 36 months later. Emotional abuse was defined as parental psychological aggression and emotional neglect was defined as parental noninvolvement.

The study found that both psychological aggression and parental noninvolvement were related to depression in the adolescents. Psychological aggression predicted an increase in symptoms of depression through increasing problems associated with peer relationships, especially for girls. The study also found that decreasing school engagement mediated the relation between parental noninvolvement and increasing symptoms of depression, but only for Hispanic adolescents.

The study's authors acknowledge limitations to their work: the study assessed teenagers through self-reports, including the assessment of emotional abuse and neglect. They suggest that in the future, researchers should leverage the strengths of a multimethod approach (e.g., parent reports, administrative data) to provide a more comprehensive picture of how different forms of emotional maltreatment may manifest and predict depression. In addition, the 18-month gap between follow-up assessments prevented researchers from detecting fluctuations in symptoms in briefer intervals.

"Current clinical services and policies are more focused on abuse than maltreatment," says Shiesha McNeil, a doctoral student in psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who coauthored the study. "By articulating the consequences of emotional neglect for different genders and ethnicities, we can develop better ways to address maltreatment and alleviate depression."

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Summarized from *Child Development, Emotional Maltreatment and Adolescent Depression: Mediating Mechanisms and Demographic Considerations in a Child Welfare Sample* by McNeil, SL (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Andrews, AR (University of Nebraska Lincoln), and Cohen, J (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Copyright 2020 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.