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Teens Who Say Their Parents Are Overcontrolling Struggle with Relationships, Educational Goals as Adults

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Perceived Psychological Control in Early Adolescence Predicts Lower Levels of Adaptation into Mid-Adulthood

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What happens to teenagers whose parents are overbearing? A new longitudinal study sought to determine the long-term impact on youth of parenting that is psychologically controlling. Although the study did not establish causation, it found that overbearing and overcontrolling tactics by parents when children were 13 years old were associated with difficulties in social relationships and educational attainment by the time the teens reached age 32.

The findings, from researchers at the University of Virginia, are published in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

“Parents, educators, and clinicians should be aware of how parents’ attempts to control teens may actually stunt their progress,” says Emily Loeb, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Virginia, who was the lead author on the study. “This style of parenting likely creates more than a temporary setback for adolescent development because it interferes with the key task of developing autonomy at a critical period.”

Past research has identified psychological control as a problematic parenting behavior. Parents attempt to control their children in this way through intrusive and harshly manipulative means (e.g., withdrawing love and affection when the parent is angry at the child, making the child feel guilty for upsetting the parent). Children whose parents use this tactic tend to have problems such as lower grades and lower self-esteem, likely because the children are discouraged from asserting themselves and gaining independence.

In this study, which examined perceived psychological control earlier in adolescent development than previous work, researchers followed 184 youth annually from ages 13 to 32. The youth, from urban and suburban areas in the Southeastern United States, came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. About half of the group was male and half female, and 42% identified themselves as members of minority racial/ethnic groups. The study also considered family income, gender, and grade point average at age 13.

Researchers asked the participants fill out questionnaires about themselves, their parents, and in adulthood, their relationship status and level of education. They also collected information from each youth's peers about how well liked the teen was in school, and they observed videos of each youth interacting with his or her closest friend and later in adulthood, interacting with his or her romantic partner.

The study found that having overbearing and overcontrolling parents at age 13 was associated with less supportive romantic relationships for those who were in relationships by age 27, a lower likelihood of being in a relationship by age 32, and lower educational attainment by age 32. These outcomes were explained largely by problems at ages 15 to 16, including that teens were less psychologically mature and were less liked by their peers.

"Even though parents routinely attempt to guide their children toward successful adaptation, overcontrolling parenting in adolescence has the potential to impede development in a fundamental way that's not easy to repair," according to Joseph Allen, Hugh Kelly Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, who coauthored the study.

The authors acknowledge several limitations to their work. First, they relied on teens' self-reports of parents' psychological control, so the measure of parenting was perceived and not observed or corroborated by parents. Second, they did not definitively show that parents' psychological control causes developmental problems. However, the authors suggest that their findings provide strong evidence that psychological control predicts long-term difficulties after ruling out other potential explanations. Finally, unmeasured characteristics of the teens (e.g., temperament) or their parents (e.g., personality) could have driven both psychological control and later outcomes in the youth.

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Summarized from Child Development, *Perceived Psychological Control in Early Adolescence Predicts Lower Levels of Adaptation into Mid-Adulthood* by Loeb, E, Kansky, J, Tan, J, Costello, M, and Allen, J (University of Virginia). Copyright 2020 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.