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Harsh Parenting Predicts Low Educational Attainment Through Increasing Peer Problems and Risky Behavior

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Gender Differences in the Developmental Cascade from Harsh Parenting to Educational Attainment: An Evolutionary Perspective

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Children exposed to harsh parenting are at greater risk of having poor school outcomes. A new longitudinal study sought to determine why. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh who conducted the study suggest that both direct and indirect effects of parenting play a role in shaping children's behavior, as well as their relationships with peers.

The study appears in the journal *Child Development*.

"We believe our study is the first to use children's life histories as a framework to examine how parenting affects children's educational outcomes via relationships with peers, sexual behavior, and delinquency," notes Rochelle F. Hentges, a postdoctoral fellow in the psychology department at the University of Pittsburgh, who led the study. "In our study, harsh parenting was related to lower educational attainment through a set of complex cascading processes that emphasized present-oriented behaviors at the cost of future-oriented educational goals." Harsh parenting was defined as yelling, hitting, and engaging in coercive behaviors like verbal or physical threats as a means of punishment.

The researchers looked at youth who were part of the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study, which examined the influences of social contexts on adolescents' academic and psychosocial development. This ongoing longitudinal study in a large county near Washington, D.C., included 1,482 students, who were followed over nine years, beginning in seventh grade and ending three years after students' expected high school graduation. By the end of the study, 1,060 students remained. The participants reflected a broad range of racial, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds.

Participants reported on their parents' use of physical and verbal aggression, as well as their own interactions with peers, delinquency, and sexual behavior. Markers of overreliance on peers included deciding to spend time with friends instead of doing homework and feeling like it's okay to break rules to keep friends. When participants were 21, they reported on their highest level of educational attainment.

Researchers found that students who were parented harshly in seventh grade were more likely in ninth grade to say their peer group was more important than other responsibilities, including following parents' rules. This in turn led them to engage in more risky behaviors in eleventh grade, including more frequent early sexual behavior in females and greater delinquency (e.g., hitting, stealing) in males. These behaviors, in turn, led to low educational achievement (as assessed by years of school completed) three years after high school, meaning that youth who were parented harshly were more likely to drop out of high school or college. Parenting influenced educational outcomes even after accounting for socioeconomic status, standardized test scores, grade point average, and educational values.

"Youth whose needs aren't met by their primary attachment figures may seek validation from peers," explains Hentges. "This may include turning to peers in unhealthy ways, which may lead to increased aggression and delinquency, as well as early sexual behavior at the expense of long-term goals such as education."

The study's findings have implications for prevention and intervention programs aimed at increasing students' engagement in school and boosting graduation rates. "Since children who are exposed to harsh and aggressive parenting are susceptible to lower educational attainment, they could be targeted for intervention," suggests Ming-Te Wang, associate professor of psychology in education at the University of Pittsburgh, who coauthored the study. Programs dealing with unhealthy peer relationships, delinquency, and sexual behaviors may also play a role in increasing educational attainment, the authors note. And teaching methods that focus on present-oriented goals and strategies (e.g., hands-on experimental learning, group activities) may promote learning and educational goals for individuals, especially those who are parented harshly.

The study was funded by the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

The Society for Research in Child Development will hold its Biennial Meeting in Austin, Texas, April 6-8, 2017. Members of the media are encouraged to attend to hear presentations on the latest research. Those journalists interested in learning more about this year's conference, or obtaining a press pass, should contact hklein@srcd.org. Conference attendance is free for qualified press with advanced registration.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Gender Differences in the Developmental Cascade from Harsh Parenting to Educational Attainment: An Evolutionary Perspective by Hentges, RF, and Wang, M-E (University of Pittsburgh). Copyright 2017 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.