

Early neglect predicts aggressive behavior in children

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Children who are neglected before their second birthday display higher levels of aggressive behavior between ages 4 and 8, according to a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill study, published today in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Early child neglect may be as important as child abuse for predicting aggressive behavior, researchers say. Neglect accounts for nearly two-thirds of all child maltreatment cases reported in the United States each year, according to the Administration for Children and Families.

“The lack of attention devoted to the problem of neglect – the so-called ‘neglect of neglect’ – is a long-standing concern in the child welfare field,” said study co-author Jon Hussey, research assistant professor of maternal and child health in the UNC School of Public Health and a fellow at the Carolina Population Center. “Despite being more common than abuse, we know relatively little about the impact of neglect on children.”

More than 1,300 children from four cities and one Southern state are participating in the longitudinal study, which is coordinated by the UNC Injury Prevention Research Center (IPRC). All were known to have been maltreated or were at risk of maltreatment. They were monitored from birth through age 8. A child was considered neglected if his parents or caregivers did not provide adequate supervision or failed to meet the child’s minimum physical needs for food, clothing and shelter. Abuse was defined as either sexual or physical.

Aggression – arguing, cruelty to others, destruction of property, disobedience, threatening people and fighting or physically attacking others – was based on perceptions of the child’s primary caregiver, who was interviewed when the child was aged 4, 6 and 8.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve seen evidence suggesting that in some circumstances, neglect can be as harmful to children as abuse,” said Hussey, who published a study in Pediatrics in 2006, linking neglect to teenage violence, depression and drug use. “Understanding the consequences of early childhood neglect will help us plan programs and other interventions to benefit these children throughout their lives.”

Source: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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