

Separation from mom, dad linked with learning trouble in kids

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In the wake of divorce, illness, violence and other problems that can unsettle homes, countless young children are liable to experience temporary separations from one or both parents before packing their knapsack for kindergarten. Published in the May/June issue of Ambulatory Pediatrics, a new, community-wide study from Rochester, New York, warns that such kids are at increased risk for learning difficulties and that these separations are good predictors of which children may require special educational interventions to succeed.

Previous research on parent-child separation has concentrated on children in foster or kinship care, who are known to often experience considerable emotional, behavioral and developmental problems. Yet little is known about the impact of separation more generally, especially in less formalized situations in which one or more parents temporarily leaves.

“In most cases, separation is a marker of instability. We suspect that homes in which children are separated from their parents may be less nurturing environments. Parents are less apt to be reading to their kids or taking time to teach them new skills, such as tying shoes, practicing their letters or penning their names,” said Sandy Jee, M.D., M.P.H., assistant professor of Pediatrics at the University of Rochester Medical Center’s Golisano Children’s Hospital, who led the study. “Kindergarten can be a wet-cement year for many kids, so it’s important that we start their educational trajectories on the best paths possible.”

The study enrolled 1,619 children between ages 4 and 6 who were entering Rochester City School District kindergarten classrooms in the fall of 2003. Parents or caregivers were asked if their child had ever been away from a parent for more than a month, and if so, if the separation occurred once, twice, or more than three times.

These adults also completed the Parent's Appraisal of Children's Experiences (PACE) survey to measure their children's developmental skills by various observable behaviors (e.g., if the child can cut with scissors; if he or she can tie their shoes") The results were then analyzed to produce four 4-point scales, each measuring different dimensions of healthy development, including: how well a child learns new tasks; how well he or she uses language to express ideas; how literate he or she is (e.g., can he or she read his own written name"); and the quality of his or her speech (e.g., do other people often have difficulty understanding the child")

"We found that 18 percent of these urban children had been separated from their parents at any point in their childhood," Jee said. "This was surprising, but not unimaginable, since poverty is often linked with volatility in homes. In fact, 7 percent of these kids had been separated two or more times."

Children who have been separated at any point scored significantly worse both on the 4-point scales measuring their ability to learn new tasks and their pre-literacy skills. Of note, their expressive language and speech scores fared better— they were comparable to those of their non-separated peers.

"This makes intuitive sense," Jee said. "In families disrupted by separation, adults are less likely to make consistent efforts to expose kids to new ideas, or to encourage reading. Without this first educational coaching from mom or dad, kids' early learning and preliteracy skills are

less likely to really blossom.

“Thankfully, most school districts require a physical before a child enters kindergarten,” she added. “Pediatricians have a unique opportunity to anticipate which children might be starting their educational careers at a disadvantage, to recommend more screening for such children, and to help see that they get the interventions they need.”

Jee and her colleagues do not know yet which types of separations might have the most deleterious effects on kids’ early learning, since the survey did not ask specific reasons for the separation. It is possible that in some instances, separations might not be caused by upsets within the home, but perhaps the pull of forces outside it: army duty, or perhaps a parent leaving to tend to a sick relative.

“This study reminds us to treat any sort of separation as a marker for possible psychosocial stress in a family,” Jee said. “And intervening early is the best way to minimize long-term educational – and vocational – deficits for these children.”

Source: University of Rochester

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