

Girls growing up with heroin-addicted parent more resilient than boys

February 11 2009

Growing up with a heroin-addicted parent exposes children to a variety of detrimental experiences before the age of 18 and new research indicates that girls are four times more resilient than boys in overcoming such adverse events.

In addition to having a heroin-addicted parent, these experiences include family mental illness, having a parent jailed, family violence, being a victim of abuse and having a parent die, and the study found 70 percent of the children were exposed to two or more of these events. In addition, 62 percent had three or more adverse experiences and 22 percent reported four or more. By contrast, just 3 percent reported no adverse experiences other than having an opiate-dependent parent.

"These are very high-risk kids with at least one parent who is addicted to heroin," said Martie Skinner, a research scientist with the University of Washington's Social Development Research Group and lead author of a new study. "What we mean by resilience is a reasonable transition to adulthood by working or being in school, avoiding substance abuse and staying out of trouble with the law in the past five years. These seem like ordinary expectations, but only 30 of the 125 young adults we studied met them."

Women were more likely to be resilient, primarily because males were more likely to have had criminal charges, she said.

The study was based on data collected from young adults at two points in

time from families recruited at two Seattle-area methadone clinics. The families initially were recruited between 1991 and 1993 for an intervention study of opiate-dependent parents in methadone treatment and their families. Their children were re-interviewed in 2005 and 2006 when they were an average of 23 years old. The young adults were predominately white or mixed race and almost equally divided by sex.

The rates of exposure to adverse childhood experiences far exceeded those in an earlier general survey of 15,000 adults enrolled in a California hospital plan. In the California study, 22 percent reported having three or more childhood adversities (vs. 62 percent in the new study) and 36 percent (vs. 3 percent) reported none.

In addition to having a drug addicted parent, the most common detrimental events experienced during childhood in the UW study were having a parent who was jailed (84 percent) and having mental illness in the family (78 percent).

The researchers also looked for factors that either promoted or interfered with later resiliency. Only high childhood scores on internalizing behaviors - such as being nervous, fearful, anxious, depressed and having sudden mood changes - or externalizing behaviors - such as acting cruelly, being disobedient, lying, bullying and having temper tantrums - were predictive. Children who were high in either of these behaviors were significantly less likely to show resiliency and more likely to have adjustment problems when they were young adults.

There were no significant differences in the findings based on race, and the researchers found that the number of different types of adverse experiences did not predict resiliency.

"This research and the earlier Focus on Families study highlight how vulnerable these children are," said Skinner. "It also indicates that there

are early warning signs, and if children get the attention they need to meet early problems it can reduce the burden on society later on in caring for them."

Skinner warned that the study may not be representative of all children growing up in a home with a heroin-addicted parent because of the limited sample size.

The research was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and was published in the current issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Source: University of Washington

Citation: Girls growing up with heroin-addicted parent more resilient than boys (2009, February 11) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-02-girls-heroin-addicted-parent-resilient-boys.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.