

Youths are most influenced by negative family members and by positive adults outside the family

February 26 2009

While children look up to and aspire to be like a positive family member or peer, they are more likely to imitate traits of other role models -- including negative role models, which can lead to behavioral problems, according to a Kansas State University researcher.

Brenda McDaniel, assistant professor of psychology at K-State, worked with colleagues at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa to study the relationship of moral traits shared by youths and their role models to find predictors of outcomes like youth conduct problems.

"Understanding the relationship between youths' view of self, youths' view of role models and youths' behavioral and psychological outcomes provides the knowledge to foster healthy, successful youth," McDaniel said.

The researchers surveyed 30 boys and girls, ages 7 to 14, from Boys and Girls clubs in Manhattan and in Tulsa, Okla. McDaniel said all of the participants in the study were categorized as having a lower socioeconomic status, lower academic outcomes and being at-risk.

The study asked students who they considered to be their role models or wanted to be like, and who they considered to be their anti-role models or didn't want to be like. Students rated their choices and themselves on 10 sets of moral constructs using a five-point scale, like being unfair

versus fair and forgiving versus not forgiving. The youths also measured themselves on their pro-social behavior and relational aggression, and provided parenting styles experienced in their home.

Though the youths reported their ideal selves being most like a positive family member and a positive peer, results showed students were most similar to a positive adult outside the family. This provides support for programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters where an adult outside the home spends time with the youth, McDaniel said.

The researchers also found that negative family members are a strong influence on the moral traits of youths. McDaniel said children who in actuality were more like a family member they didn't want to be like had higher reports of relational aggression and also received higher forms of corporal punishment in the home, such as spanking.

"Youths' inability to incorporate positive role model behaviors into their self-concept relates to youth conduct problems, such as acting out and starting fights," McDaniel said. "Positive parenting and mother involvement seem to be key components, which aid this ability."

The researchers also found that immoral traits, like lying and being unfriendly, shared between youths and all role models was significantly predictive of youth witnessing anti-social behaviors in their neighborhood, such as vandalism.

In addition, the youths were asked to name a celebrity they look up to, but the researchers found that the famous individuals had little influence on the youths' moral traits.

The study was funded by the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station. McDaniel said future research includes laboratory-site studies where interaction between youth and a role model will be recorded and coded

for important information, such as interpersonal emotional exchange and physiological stress levels.

McDaniel's colleagues for the project are Amanda Sheffield Morris, associate professor of human development and family science and Benjamin Houlberg, a doctoral student in human development and family science, both at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa.

Source: Kansas State University

Citation: Youths are most influenced by negative family members and by positive adults outside the family (2009, February 26) retrieved 9 April 2024 from

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