

Supportive co-parenting may reduce some child behavior problems

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Warm, cooperative co-parenting between mothers and fathers may help protect children who are at risk for some types of behavior problems, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that supportive co-parenting helped children who have difficulty regulating their behavior and attention levels - what researchers call effortful control.

The study looked at changes in children's level of aggressive behavior and other forms of "acting out" as they went from 4 years old to 5 years old.

Results showed that children who had low levels of effortful control generally showed increases in these negative behaviors over the course of the year - unless their parents had a supportive co-parenting relationship.

"It's a positive message for parents," said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, lead author of the study and assistant professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"If you support your spouse in front of your child, show that you are a united front, it can help prevent some behavior problems in children who may be at risk."

While it is no surprise that supportive parenting is good for children,

relatively few studies have examined the role of co-parenting - how parents interact together while parenting their child - in childhood development, Schoppe-Sullivan said. Most studies only look at the effect of mothers' parenting on children.

Effortful control is an aspect of temperament, and is influenced by genetics, although early environment also seems to play a role, Schoppe-Sullivan said. The trait is generally stable over time, meaning that children who have trouble controlling their attention and behavior in early childhood tend to still have the problem when they enter school.

"If you have a child who has trouble controlling his or her behavior, that's not a problem that often goes away," she said. "That's one reason why it is so significant that positive co-parenting can help manage the problem."

The study appears online in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, and will be published in a future print edition.

The research involved 92 families with a 4-year-old child. The parents and children visited a lab for about 1.5 hours. Parents completed a questionnaire about their child's temperament, and mothers reported about their child's behavior.

The researchers also asked a preschool teacher or day care provider of each child to give their independent assessment of the child's behavior.

Each mother, father, and child was then videotaped while completing two 10-minute tasks together. The tasks, which included building a house out of a toy-building set, were designed to see how mothers and fathers worked with each other and their child to complete the task.

After watching the videotape, researchers rated the quality of the co-

parenting relationship. They looked for signs of supportive co-parenting, such as couples encouraging and cooperating with each other as they helped their child. Researchers also looked for evidence of couples criticizing each other's parenting or trying to "outdo" each other in their efforts to work with the child.

One year later, mothers again reported on children's behavior, as did the children's preschool or kindergarten teachers.

While levels of aggressive behaviors increased during that year in many children with low effortful control, the notable exception was children whose parents showed supportive co-parenting.

"Supportive co-parenting may have prevented growth in these negative behaviors over one year's time," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

The study doesn't show exactly what it is about supportive co-parenting that helps children with behavior problems. But it may be that good co-parenting promotes a sense of family security in children that makes it easier for them to focus on controlling their own behaviors and emotions.

"Children who have trouble controlling their behavior often find it hard not to act out when they are in a situation where they are provoked, or frustrated or angry," she said. "It helps when they have that supportive family environment, and parents who are sending the same messages to the child, and reinforcing each other along the way."

She cautioned that this study was done with relatively affluent, well-functioning families, and few children who had severe problems regulating their attention and behavior. Still, the results showed new benefits to supportive co-parenting.

These findings extend previous work by Schoppe-Sullivan and others that showed supportive co-parenting also strengthens marital relationships and leads to better individual parenting.

"Co-parenting has a central role in families with children," she said. "If you can improve that relationship, there are all kinds of positive effects on the children and on the other family relationships."

Source: Ohio State University

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