

High sensitivity to stress isn't always bad for children

February 5 2010

Children who are especially reactive to stress are more vulnerable to adversity and have more behavior and health problems than their peers. But a new longitudinal study suggests that highly reactive children are also more likely to do well when they're raised in supportive environments.

The study, by scientists at the University of British Columbia, the University of California, San Francisco, and the University of California, Berkeley, appears in the January/February 2010 issue of the journal [Child Development](#).

"[Parents](#) and teachers may find that sensitive [children](#), like orchids, are more challenging to raise and care for, but they can bloom into individuals of exceptional ability and strength when reared in a supportive, nurturing, and encouraging environment," according to Jelena Obradović, an assistant professor in the School of Education at Stanford University (Dr. Obradović was at the University of British Columbia when she led the study).

The researchers looked at 338 kindergarteners, as well as their [teachers](#) and families, to determine how family adversity and biological reactivity contribute to healthy development.

They found that children who had significantly stronger biological reactions to a series of mildly stressful tasks designed to look like challenges in their daily lives were more affected by their family

contexts, both bad and good. This means that highly reactive children were more likely to have developmental problems when growing up in adverse, stressful family settings.

But contrary to expectation, such children were also more likely to thrive when they were raised in caring, low-stress families because of their sensitivities to the supportive and nurturing qualities of such environments.

"The study tells us that when children are highly susceptible to stress, it's not always bad news, but rather should be considered in terms of the type of environment they live in," explains Obradović.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

Citation: High sensitivity to stress isn't always bad for children (2010, February 5) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-02-high-sensitivity-stress-isnt-bad.html>

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