

Genders of alcohol-dependent parents and children influence psychopathology in the children

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Scientists already know that the children of alcohol-dependent (AD) individuals have a greater risk of developing a psychiatric illness, but the effects of gender on this risk are not well known. A new study has found that the effects of parental AD on a child's psychopathology can be different, depending on both the gender of the AD parent and the gender of their child.

Results will be published in the October 2010 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"The problems caused by alcoholism are not limited to the individual who suffers from it," said Peter T. Morgan, associate professor of psychiatry at Yale University and corresponding author for the study. "[Children](#) are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of alcoholism in a parent, and adult children of alcoholics are in general at much greater risk for developing every type of [psychiatric illness](#)."

"The study by Morgan and his colleagues is noteworthy for several reasons," added Peter E. Nathan, Professor Emeritus of psychology and public health at the University of Iowa. "It examined the interaction of a large number of demographic, social, and psychological/psychiatric variables in a very substantial sample of more than 40,000 men and women. Consonant with prior findings, the study confirmed a significant

positive relationship between alcoholism in parents and increased risk of alcoholism and other forms of psychopathology in their adult children. It then took the gender issue an important step further by examining relationships between psychopathology in the male and female adult children of alcoholic parents and the parents' gender. The results? The gender of both the offspring and the parents played determining roles in the psychopathology of the children."

Both Morgan and Nathan said that this is likely the first study to broadly examine how the gender of the alcoholic parent and the child interact to affect the child's risk for a psychopathology. "The several significant interactions they found between the gender of the alcoholic parents and the gender of their children that impacted on the psychopathology in the children ... represent a groundbreaking contribution," said Nathan.

Morgan and his colleagues used data from the National Epidemiological Survey on [Alcohol](#) and Related Conditions, examining the gender-specific prevalence of Axis I (clinical disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, social phobia) and Axis II (personality disorders such as paranoia, antisocial and borderline personality) disorders in 40,374 respondents (23,006 males, 17,368 females) with and without a history of paternal or maternal alcoholism.

"The key, new finding of this work is that the effect parental alcoholism has on children is different depending on the gender of the alcoholic parent and the gender of the child," said Morgan. "This is a largely novel finding and raises questions about how this is happening. In particular, this finding opens an avenue for studying interactions between genetics and environment, biological psychiatry, and psychology."

"An unexpected finding," added Nathan, "was that this parent-child influence appears strongest in the female parent-female child pairing, where it was most influential in yielding heightened risk for mania,

nicotine dependence, [alcohol](#) abuse, and schizoid personality disorder. The same interaction was apparently also responsible for lesser findings of increased risk in male parent-male child, male parent-female child, and female parent-male child pairings."

"The day-to-day significance of these findings is two-fold," said Morgan. "First, these findings reiterate how damaging alcoholism can be to the mental health of children who grow up with an alcoholic parent. Second, and particular to this study, these findings indicate that in a family with an alcoholic mother, daughters may be at greater relative risk for developing psychiatric problems. Such information could be used to identify patients at potentially greater risk for certain disorders and could be used to encourage reduction of substance use in parents."

"I would think that a primary health care provider treating a substance abusing woman would want to induce her to enter treatment for her AD as early in its course as possible," added Nathan, "given the likelihood that both she and her children, especially her female children, would likely run an especially high risk of psychopathology. The primary health care provider should also be alert to the heightened possibility of psychopathology in the female offspring of AD women and should, accordingly, help identify prevention/treatment programs for the child as early as possible."

Nathan also said these findings provide a blueprint for future research. "We have long suspected that parental gender plays a role in the etiology of substance abuse," he said. "Now it appears that the gender of their offspring, interacting with that of the parents, helps explain the psychopathology of the offspring. Clearly, expanded scrutiny of gender as a causal factor in the development of psychopathology is called for."

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