

# Spare the rod, spoil the child?

September 21 2010

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Grabbing a child firmly by the arm, yelling and repeatedly punishing him or her may not be without long-term risks, according to researchers from the University of Montreal. They are studying how this harsh parenting can impair the emotional development of a child, possibly leading to anxiety disorders such as social phobia, separation anxiety and panic attacks.

"Several studies have shown that coercive parenting practices are linked to [anxiety](#)," says Françoise Maheu a professor at the Université de Montréal's Department of Psychiatry and lead investigator of the study. "We know that common practices such as spanking or excessive punishment do not instill a strong discipline. Quite the opposite, they have a lasting psychological impact on children."

## Showing the physiological effect

Maheu and her team are investigating specifically how the anatomy or physiology of the brain is affected by this parenting. They are in the process of recruiting 120 youths aged 12 to 17 years. These youths will be split into four groups according to two variables: their current anxiety symptoms and their parent's current harsh [parenting practices](#). While doing behavioural tests, the children will be subjected to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), where their brain activity (cerebral activity) will be measured. Maheu will then be able to correlate brain activity with fear and anxiety.

"My hypothesis is that two specialized structures, the amygdala and the

anterior cingulate cortex, which form the neural fear circuit, play a role in mediating the anxiety associated with harsh parenting. We are investigating these structures because they are strongly associated with the processing of threat cues" says Maheu.

"Investigating the links among harsh parenting, fear circuitry and anxiety in youths will provide key insights on the developmental neurobiology of harsh parenting and anxiety," adds Maheu. "Understanding this while individuals are young is crucial as it could lead to early interventions that would effectively interrupt a development trajectory early in its course, before anxiety becomes chronic."

According to research findings, [anxiety disorders](#) may result from a combination of biochemical imbalances, genetic factors and stress. School, moving, illness, poverty, and peer pressures can all contribute to the development of an anxiety disorder. If symptoms are not recognized and treated these disorders may lead to alcoholism, difficulties maintaining relationships, depression and in certain cases, suicide.

Provided by University of Montreal

Citation: Spare the rod, spoil the child? (2010, September 21) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-09-rod-child.html>

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