

Parents' addiction, unemployment and divorce are risk factors for childhood abuse

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Adults who had parents who struggled with addiction, unemployment and divorce are 10 times more likely to have been victims of childhood physical abuse, according to a new study prepared by the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

The study, which was published online this week in the journal *Child: Care, Health & Development*, found that more than one-third of adults who grew up in homes where all three [risk factors](#) were present reported they had been physically abused by someone close to them while under the age of 18 and still living at home.

The results found that only 3.4 per cent of those with none of the three risk factors reported they had been physically abused. However, with each additional risk factor experienced, the prevalence of childhood [physical abuse](#) increased dramatically.

Approximately 13 per cent of those with one risk factor reported childhood physical abuse (CPA). The prevalence of child physical abuse was between 8% and 11% for those who had experienced parental [divorce](#) alone or parental [unemployment](#) alone but increased to between 18% and 19% for those who experienced parental addictions alone. Between 25 per cent and 30 per cent of those who had experienced two risk factors reported they had been abused in childhood. Among those with all three risk factors, the prevalence of CPA was between 36 and 41 per cent, representing a ten-fold increase from the 3.4 per cent reported by those without any of these risk factors. The study was based on two

representative community samples, one study conducted in 1995 and the second, with a different sample, in 2005. Each survey included approximately 13,000 Canadians aged 18 and older.

"We were so astonished by the magnitude of the association between the combination of these three risk factors and child abuse in the 1995 survey that we replicated the analysis with a different sample from a 2005 survey," says co-author Jami-Leigh Sawyer, a University of Toronto doctoral student and a social worker at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. "The findings in both data sets were remarkably consistent and very worrisome."

The study's findings have important clinical implications for pediatricians, family doctors, social workers and other healthcare providers working with children and their families, says lead author Esme Fuller-Thomson, Sandra Rotman Chair at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Department of Family and Community Medicine. "It appears that children from homes with parental addictions, parental unemployment and parental divorce are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Such knowledge will hopefully improve the targeting of screening for childhood physical abuse."

Provided by University of Toronto

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