

Neglected boys may turn into violent adolescents

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Parents who physically neglect their boys may increase the risk that they will raise violent adolescents, according to Penn State sociologists.

In a study of currently incarcerated male adolescents, physical [neglect](#) during childhood arose as the strongest predictor of violent behavior, said William McGuigan, associate professor of human development and family studies at Penn State Shenango. Researchers are just beginning to acknowledge the powerful role of neglect in influencing adolescent violence, he added.

"One of the problems with studying neglect is that it is an act of omission, rather than one of commission. In other words, it is characterized as the absence of an act, rather than an actual act of mistreatment," said McGuigan. "However, now we have better measures and larger databases to document neglect."

Examples of physical neglect include not taking a sick or injured child to the doctor, improperly clothing a child and not feeding a child, according to the researchers who will present their findings today (Aug. 18) at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

The study indicated that while physical abuse is a significant contributor to violent behavior, physical neglect alone is an even stronger predictor of male adolescent violence than physical abuse, or even physical abuse and neglect combined.

"It sounds somewhat contrarian, but the [physical abuse](#) might at least show that parents are paying some type of attention to the child," said McGuigan, who worked with Roxanne Atterholt, instructor, and Jack A. Luchette, an undergraduate student, both in in [human development](#) and family studies at Penn State Shenango.

McGuigan said that understanding how neglect can influence [violent behavior](#) in adolescent males may lead to better education for caregivers and better care for at-risk youths.

"We have to look more into neglect and become more aware of how it may cause some of these violent behaviors," said McGuigan. "From that, we can build early preventative care programs than can help avoid these negative outcomes."

The research could also create assessments that, for example, might help protect people who care for adolescents by identifying youths who are more prone to violence.

The researchers analyzed data taken from a survey of 85 subjects, who are residents of a Pennsylvania detention center for delinquent males. In the survey, 25 of the participants, or 29.4 percent of the group, said that they experienced at least one incidence of childhood neglect. Acts of violence included fighting with students or parents, hitting teachers or instructors and using a weapon to scare, rob or injure another person.

Sexual abuse was not included in the survey. Only two subjects responded that they were sexually abused in the survey, which was not enough to provide conclusive findings, McGuigan said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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