

Psychology professor investigates how stress affects low-income Richmond-area parents' ability to raise children

November 24 2014, by Brian Mcneill

Over the course of two years, Wendy Kliewer, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, surveyed more than 300 low-income female caregivers who were parenting children in the Richmond area to learn how high levels of violence, noise, crowding and other stressful factors, such as health issues, family conflicts and concerns about money, were affecting their ability to raise the children.

Kliewer, chair of the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences, recently discussed the study, "Parental Strain, Mental Health Problems, and Parenting Practices: A Longitudinal Study," which was published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

After interviewing 316 low-income female caregivers who were parenting youth in the Richmond area, what were some of the key conclusions you found?

We found that caregivers' [life stress](#) and the victimization they reported during their first interview was related to increases in depression, anxiety and hostility one year later at their second interview. These mental health symptoms then went on to affect their parenting. One year later, at the third interview, caregivers with higher levels of depression, anxiety and hostility knew less about their [adolescents'](#) whereabouts and reported that their adolescents were less likely to confide in them.

Were you surprised by any of your findings?

I've been concerned about parents for a long time, so the fact that life stress and victimization affected [caregivers'](#) mental health did not surprise me. The relationship between parents' [mental health](#) and [parenting practices](#) wasn't so much a surprise as a confirmation that we need to do what we can to help parents be effective in their role.

Are there public policy implications of this study? Should more be done to support this population?

Parenting is a very important job and stressful even when resources are plentiful. When you add economic strain and family stressors on top of the normal things that parents of adolescents have to deal with, it can be tough. Just as we have programs to help adolescents with coping and emotion regulation I think programs for parents to support them in their roles could be useful. If we can help parents cope effectively, I believe that can go a long way to helping adolescents adjust, because parents will be better role models and will be able to be more sensitive and responsive to their children's needs.

What led to your interest in this topic?

When I came to VCU in 1992, I had an interest in coping socialization—that is, how children acquire the coping skills they learn. As a developmental scientist, I believe that happens first in the family context, although clearly children and adolescents learn from other sources as well. I came to believe that as a field we weren't putting enough focus on [parents](#).

Are you planning to continue researching this topic?

Yes. Most of my work incorporates family influences in one way or another.

What are you working on next?

Currently I am collecting data from moms and teens in the community for [Project HEART: Health and Resilience in Teens](#) with my colleague Jo Robins, Ph.D., from the School of Nursing. We are looking at stress and health, including family dynamics and how that relates to risk for cardiometabolic disorders. There are things families do that increase health risks and things families do that protect youth from health risks. Since African-Americans are much more likely than Caucasians to develop specific health problems, we want to understand that better and try to intervene early to change the course that these adolescents are on.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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