

Kindergartners with traumatic life experiences struggle more in school

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(HealthDay)—Childhood traumas of various sorts can cause

kindergartners to struggle in class as well as life, new research contends.

A study of more than 1,000 urban children showed those with difficult [experiences](#) up until age 5 had math and reading difficulties and difficulty focusing in kindergarten, and were also more likely to have social problems and to be aggressive toward others.

The experiences included neglect or physical, sexual or psychological abuse. They also included living in a household with domestic abuse or with a household member who was in jail or prison, had a mental illness or had an addiction or substance abuse problem.

"The first five years of a child's life are an incredible time of opportunity and vulnerability," said study lead author Dr. Manuel Jimenez, director of developmental and behavioral pediatrics education at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, N.J. "Combined with previous work documenting how early traumatic experiences are tied to poor health, these findings illustrate how early adversity can place children at risk for poor outcomes across multiple aspects of life."

The findings were published online Jan. 14 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The Rutgers researchers interviewed the caregivers of just over 1,000 children and found that slightly more than half of the kids had faced at least one out of nine adverse experiences; 12 percent had experienced three of them.

The researchers adjusted their calculations to account for other differences among the children, including age; gender; mother's race, ethnicity or educational level; their parents' relationship when they were born, and household income.

After these adjustments, the researchers found children with at least three adverse childhood experiences had 80 percent greater odds of having math, language and literacy skills below average than children with no childhood difficulties.

Children with at least three tough experiences were more than three times more likely to have attention problems and almost three times more likely to have [social problems](#). Their odds of showing aggression were also more than double those of children without adverse childhood experiences.

It's unclear how these traumatic experiences might cause long-term negative effects, but several things are probably at work, said Mayra Mendez. She is a program coordinator for intellectual and developmental disabilities and [mental health services](#) at Providence Saint John's Child and Family Development Center in Santa Monica, Calif.

"When a child and parents need to focus energy on [adverse experiences](#), there is less energy for the parent to exert on nurturing security, safety and a healthy learning environment," said Mendez, who was not involved with the study. A child trying to cope and survive has less energy for learning, problem-solving, playing and imagination, she added.

Dr. Danelle Fisher, chair of pediatrics at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, said a child's emotional distress may also make it harder to concentrate, and they may experience post-traumatic stress.

"When the child is having signs of difficulty in the school arena, parents and teachers can then address the problem and keep the child progressing towards their goals, both in school and in life," said Fisher, who had no role in the research. In general, "parents can be loving towards their children, be inquisitive about their lives and have open communication with the child's teacher" to create a nurturing

environment for children, she added.

One of the first steps to reducing the negative impact of traumatic events on children is to increase awareness about how it can affect development, Mendez noted.

"When parents are aware, then they are more likely to seek support and help from community resources," Mendez said. "Awareness also increases detection and recognition of difficulties and parents may be more likely to take steps to prevent exposing their young child to trauma."

"The love and unconditional support of a warm and nurturing caregiver can serve as a critical source of strength and as a buffer for the adversity [children](#) may face in their lives," Jimenez added. "But sometimes even the best parents can't do it alone. Many face unbelievable challenges, and that's why it's important that we build systems that can be a source of support."

More information: For more on the effects of adverse childhood experiences, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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