

Adolescent depression in girls offset by presence of 'boomerang father'

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Adolescent depression in girls is offset by the presence of 'boomerang fathers,' those who cycle in and out of their children's lives. Credit: University of Houston

A study of the impact of "boomerang fathers"—those who cycle in and

out of their children's lives—yielded surprising results for researchers. "Boomerang fathering" provided a type of stability in a daughter's life that staved off her depressive symptoms compared to those adolescent girls whose fathers were completely absent.

The study, "Boomerang Fathers in Adolescent Female Depression," was published in the National Council on Family Relations, *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

"Previous research has suggested that stressful experiences, like [family instability](#), father absence or stepfather presence, contribute to an adolescent experiencing depression," said Daphne Hernandez, University of Houston assistant professor and principal investigator. "This is not what happened in the cases of these youth. Boomerang fathering served as a protective factor for female adolescent depression compared to female adolescents who experienced instability, but not boomerang fathers."

Hernandez, of the Department of Health and Human Performance, worked with researchers from New York University and Iowa State University.

"We're finding a new way that families might support their children. Even though the family has gone through some really bad times, having the dad come back has proven to be positive," said Cassandra Dorius, an assistant professor of human development and family studies at Iowa State University.

Using data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the Young Adult files, researchers examined responses from nearly 4,000 youth who were 18 years old by the year 2010 and more than 3,300 mothers. A third of the daughters sampled had unstable father residential patterns—they never lived with their biological father or they

experienced boomerang fathering (father left the family, then returned to the same partner).

Among their findings:

- There was no real difference between adolescent depressive symptoms of girls who lived with their biological father from birth to 18 years of age and those who lived with boomerang fathers
- Adolescent girls exposed to boomerang fathers had lower [depressive symptoms](#) at 18 years of age than those exposed to unstable, non-boomerang fathers
- Boomerang fathering was not significantly related to depression in adolescent boys

The overarching goal of the study was to contribute to the growing body of research on family instability and paternal involvement by focusing on boomerang fathering from birth through the child's 18th birthday.

Hernandez notes that biological parents who boomerang are more likely to be single at the time of their child's birth, which she says suggests is "a gateway for which boomeranging exists" since there is no legal or residential commitment. Additionally, most households with boomeranging fathers did not experience a stepparent or nonbiological father presence.

"Familiarity of a biological father who enters and exits the house may deter nonbiological partners from entering their children's lives, lowering the activation of the hormone that causes stress and depression," Hernandez said. "Although the relationship between the [biological father](#) and mother may be complex, there is a commitment to the child by the boomerang father that creates a bond between father and child."

The researchers say the study's findings suggest family instability is more fluid and complex than previously thought, indicating greater family support during times of instability may assist in creating positive mental health.

Provided by University of Houston

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