

Childhood family environment linked with relationship quality 60 years later

October 11 2016



Credit: Association for Psychological Science

Growing up in a warm family environment in childhood is associated with feeling more secure in romantic relationships in one's 80s, according to new research published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. The findings show that men who grew up in caring homes were more adept at managing stressful emotions when assessed as middle-aged adults, which helps to explain why they had more secure marriages late in life.

"Our study shows that the influences of [childhood experiences](#) can be demonstrated even when people reach their 80s, predicting how happy

and secure they are in their marriages as octogenarians," says researcher Robert Waldinger of Harvard Medical School. "We found that this link occurs in part because warmer childhoods promote better emotion management and interpersonal skills at midlife, and these skills predict more secure marriages in late life."

The unique longitudinal study, which followed the same individuals for over six decades beginning in adolescence, provides evidence for the life-long effects of childhood experiences.

"With all the things that happen to human beings and influence them between adolescence and the ninth decade of life, it's remarkable that the influence of childhood on late-life marriage can still be seen," notes Marc Schulz, study co-author and professor at Bryn Mawr College.

Waldinger and Schulz examined data collected from 81 men who participated in a 78-year study of adult development, 51 of whom were part of a Harvard College cohort and 30 of whom were part of an inner-city Boston cohort. All of the men completed regular interviews and questionnaires throughout the course of the study.

To gauge the participants' early home environment, the researchers examined data collected when the participants were adolescents, including participants' reports about their home life, interviews with the participants' parents, and developmental histories recorded by a social worker. The researchers used these data to create a composite measure of family environment.

When the participants were 45 to 50 years old, they completed interviews in which they discussed the challenges they encountered in various aspects of their lives, including their relationships, their physical health, and their work. The research team used the original interview notes to rate participants' ability to manage their emotions in response to

these challenges.

Finally, when participants were in their late 70s or early 80s, they completed a semistructured interview that focused on their attachment bond with their current partner. In these interviews, they were asked to talk about their marriages, including how comfortable they were depending on their partner and providing support to their partner. The researchers used data from these interviews to establish an overall rating of participants' security of attachment to their partner.

Waldinger and Schulz found that participants who had a nurturing [family environment](#) early in life were more likely to have secure attachments to their romantic partners late in life. Further analyses indicated that this association could be explained, in part, by better emotion regulation skills in midlife.

These results add to previous research showing that the quality of people's early home environments can have "far-reaching effects on wellbeing, life achievement, and relationship functioning throughout the lifespan," says Waldinger.

Taken together, these findings highlight the life-long effects of childhood experience, emphasize the importance of prioritizing the wellbeing of children, and suggest that supporting adaptive emotion management skills may help to lessen the impact of early childhood adversity, Waldinger and Schulz conclude.

More information: R. J. Waldinger et al, The Long Reach of Nurturing Family Environments: Links With Midlife Emotion-Regulatory Styles and Late-Life Security in Intimate Relationships, *Psychological Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797616661556](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616661556)

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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