

Children of separated parents not on speaking terms more likely to develop colds as adults

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Previous research has indicated that adults whose parents separated during childhood have an increased risk for poorer health. However,

exactly what contributes to this has been less clear, until now.

A team led by Carnegie Mellon University psychologists wanted to better understand if specific aspects of the [family](#) environment following a separation better predicted children's long-term health outcomes. Published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, they found that adults whose [parents](#) separated but did not speak to each other during individuals' childhoods were three times as likely to develop a cold when intentionally exposed to a [common cold virus](#) than adults whose parents had remained together or separated but continued to communicate.

"Early life [stressful experiences](#) do something to our physiology and inflammatory processes that increase risk for poorer health and chronic illness," said Michael Murphy, a psychology postdoctoral research associate in CMU's Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. "This work is a step forward in our understanding of how family stress during childhood may influence a child's susceptibility to disease 20-40 years later."

For the study, 201 healthy adults were quarantined, experimentally exposed to a virus that causes a common cold and monitored for five days for the development of a respiratory illness.

The results showed that [adults](#) whose parents lived apart and never spoke during their childhood were more than three times as likely to develop a cold compared to those from intact families. The increased risk was due, in part, to heightened inflammation in response to a viral infection.

The team also found that individuals whose parents were separated but communicated with each other showed no increase in risk compared to the intact families.

"Our results target the immune system as an important carrier of the long-term negative impact of early family conflict," said Sheldon Cohen, the Robert E. Doherty University Professor of Psychology. "They also suggest that all divorces are not equal, with continued communication between parents buffering deleterious effects of separation on the [health](#) trajectories of the children."

More information: Michael L. M. Murphy et al., "Offspring of parents who were separated and not speaking to one another have reduced resistance to the common cold as adults," *PNAS* (2017). www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1700610114

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

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