

Study explores how adverse parenting styles can follow a multi-generational cycle

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University of Calgary adjunct assistant professor Sheila McDonald says, “We want to find ways of building resiliency for children and their mothers and improve the outcomes for children.” Credit: University of Calgary

Our experiences as children growing up inform how we parent when we have kids of our own. But when those experiences are abusive, neglectful or otherwise adverse, they can increase the risk for a negative cycle that can play out for generations within a family.

An ongoing University of Calgary-based study, All Our Families, is seeking to understand this cyclical process and new funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health will help researchers identify effective interventions to break these disruptive cycles.

"We want to get at the cycle of adversity and look at how we can support [parents](#) and help them ensure healthy development in their [children](#)," says Sheila McDonald, adjunct assistant professor in paediatrics with the Cumming School of Medicine and lead scientist of the All Our Families cohort. "We're also looking at resiliency, the factors that help protect against poor maternal and child outcomes."

Cohort of 3,200 pairs of Alberta mothers and children

The All Our Families study involves researchers from the Cumming School of Medicine, Faculty of Nursing and the Department of Psychology. It has been running for a decade now with a cohort of 3,200 pairs of Alberta mothers and children yielding numerous research findings and published papers on child development, maternal and mental health and community resource utilization. Data has been collected through questionnaires from the participating mothers during pregnancy, post-partum and continuing and as their children turned one, two, three, four, five and eight. Researchers hope to continue collecting data until at least adolescence.

A fellow researcher of McDonald's, the University of Calgary's Sheri Madigan—Canada Research Chair in the Determinants of Child

Development—recently released the results of her related study published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* based on a cohort of mothers from Ontario.

For McDonald's research, data collected from the All Our Families cohort based in Alberta will be analyzed to determine patterns and factors that lead to the transmission of adversity from parents to children.

Study focuses on how highly stressful experiences impact how we parent

In this study, maternal childhood adversity includes physical and emotional abuse, alcoholism or mental illness in a parent and other highly stressful experiences that can negatively impact childhood development in the next generation.

"We're looking at how this cycle works. And then, can we introduce interventions through social support and community-based programs to provide coping mechanisms and strategies to support parents and normalize help-seeking. The accumulation of adversity over time only increases the impact of these experiences and perpetuates the cycle," says McDonald, a member of the O'Brien Institute of Public Health. "We want to find ways of building resiliency for children and their mothers and improve the outcomes for children."

More information: Understanding Development across the Lifecourse: allourbabiesstudy.com/

Provided by University of Calgary

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