

Tracking the impact of early abuse and neglect

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Children who experience abuse and neglect early in life are more likely to have problems in social relationships and underachieve academically as adults.

Maltreatment experienced before age 5 can have negative effects that continue to be seen nearly three decades later, according to a new study led by Lee Raby, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Utah.

"It is not a controversial statement to say abuse and neglect can have harmful consequences," Raby said. "This study adds to that by showing that these effects are long term and don't weaken with time. They persist from childhood across adolescence and into adulthood."

The journal *Child Development* published the study. Co-authors are: Glenn I. Roisman and Madelyn H. Labella, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota; Jodi Martin, Department of Psychology, York University; R. Chris Fraley, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and Jeffry A. Simpson, Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota.

Raby said his team wanted to know two things: Does [maltreatment](#) early in life have long-term associations that extend into adulthood and do those effects remain stable or weaken over time?

The researchers used data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, which has followed participants since their births in the mid-1970s. The U study looked at data on 267 individuals who had reached ages between 32 and 34.

Information about the participants' exposure to physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect was gathered from multiple sources during two age periods: 0-5 years and 6-17.5 years. Throughout childhood and adolescence, teachers reported on the children's functioning with peers. The children also completed standardized tests on academic achievement. The participants were interviewed again during their 20s and 30s, during which they discussed romantic experiences and

educational attainment.

Unlike studies based on adults' retrospective accounts of their childhood experiences, the data used here were collected in real-time. In addition, because data on the participants has been collected throughout their lifetimes, the researchers were able to disentangle the effects of maltreatment that occurred in their early years from experiences of abuse and neglect during later childhood.

"The design allows us to ask our two questions in a way no other study has before," Raby said.

Raby said the findings showed those who experienced abuse or neglect early in life consistently were less successful in their [social relationships](#) and academic performance during childhood, adolescence and even during adulthood. The effects of maltreatment did not weaken as the participants got older.

"The harmful effect of early abuse and neglect was just as important when we were looking at outcomes at age 32 years as when we looked at outcomes at age 5," he said.

The researchers found abuse and neglect in later childhood also impacted these competencies in adulthood, but that later maltreatment did not fully account for persistent and long-term influences attributed to abuse and neglect experienced in early [childhood](#). They also found long-term difficulties with social functioning—but not academic achievement—occurred independent of such factors as gender, ethnicity and early socioeconomic status.

"These findings add more evidence for the importance of identifying high-risk families and attempting to intervene before experiences of [abuse](#) and [neglect](#) occur," Raby said.

More information: K. Lee Raby et al, The Legacy of Early Abuse and Neglect for Social and Academic Competence From Childhood to Adulthood, *Child Development* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13033](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13033)

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