

Classroom friendships may offset effects of punitive parents

November 21 2018



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Angry, threatening and highly critical parenting is more likely to result in children with defiant, noncompliant and revengeful behavior that spills over to adulthood and impacts relationships with all authority figures.

Now a study by researchers at UC San Francisco has confirmed this link and found that kindergarten may provide a unique opportunity for these harshly parented children to retool negative behavior. The study is published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology* on Nov. 21, 2018.

In the study, the researchers looked at 338 kindergartners in six public schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. They found that 10 percent of the children met the criteria for oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Among this group, 71 percent had been exposed to high levels of harsh parenting, versus 29 percent who had been raised with lower levels of harsh parenting.

ODD is characterized by angry and irritable mood, argumentative and defiant behavior, and spiteful or vindictive outbursts, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In [young children](#), the condition is linked with an elevated risk in adolescence and adulthood for antisocial behavior, anxiety, depression, [substance abuse](#), criminal offenses and incarceration, the study authors noted.

Friendships May Make Kids Pro-Social

The researchers discovered that when harshly parented children were liked and accepted by their classmates—according to interviews with their peers and teacher reports—they exhibited fewer undesirable traits. This subset was found to have 64 percent lower symptoms of ODD than those who were not liked.

"Acceptance within one's peer group creates opportunities for socialization and a sense of belonging that acts as a buffer against the impact of harsh parenting," said first author Danielle Roubinov, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UCSF Department of Psychiatry and a member of the UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences.

"Healthy peer relationships may have an attenuating influence by modelling or providing children with feedback about the inappropriate nature of oppositional behaviors acquired from harsh interactions with parents."

Roubinov and her team also found that a warm [relationship](#) with classroom teachers mitigated adverse behavior in these harshly parented kindergartners. Symptoms of ODD were 29 percent lower in this group if the teacher-student relationship was close, according to student reports. This confirms previous studies by other [researchers](#) that reported that positive teacher-student relationships were linked with less aggressive behavior in children.

Self-Regulation, 'Positive Emotionality,' Improve When Kids Are Tight with Teachers

"The teacher-child relationship has frequently been framed in terms of extended attachment theory, and a high-quality teacher-child relationship may function in a manner analogous to the secure base of a child's primary attachment, the parent," said Roubinov. "Warm relationships may improve children's self-regulation, positive emotionality and responsiveness to warnings about oppositional behavior."

The results of the study suggest that treating ODD outside of the family environment may be helpful said senior author Nicki Bush, Ph.D., associate professor in the UCSF departments of Psychiatry and Pediatrics and a member of UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences.

"There is a significant proportion of families for whom parent training is minimally effective. Teacher programs that focus on managing difficult classrooms and providing support for at-risk children may be optimally timed to interrupt the developmental processes that lead to long-term poor outcomes and more severe psychopathology when ODD symptoms

are left untreated."

Harsh parenting was assessed according to 18 statements, which the parents were instructed to rank on a seven-point scale ranging from "extremely true" to "extremely untrue." Statements centered on parents' discipline strategies, such as "I believe physical punishment to be the best way of disciplining" and "I do not allow my child to question my decisions."

Oppositional defiant disorder was assessed according to parent and teacher questionnaires that asked them to rank the frequency with which the child argued with adults and peers, blamed others for their mistakes and had temper tantrums. The [children](#)'s own perceptions of their [behavior](#) were included in the assessment.

Provided by University of California, San Francisco

Citation: Classroom friendships may offset effects of punitive parents (2018, November 21) retrieved 20 April 2024 from

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