

Early parent-child conflicts predict trouble charting life path

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Credit: 100 files from Pexels

Children who have more conflict in relationships with their mothers during early years of elementary school may find it more difficult to find a sense of purpose in life as they reach adulthood, suggests new research

from Washington University in St. Louis.

"One of the biggest takeaway messages from these findings is that the path to a purposeful life starts very early, well before we start to consider different goals for life," said Patrick Hill, associate professor of psychological and brain sciences in Arts & Sciences and co-author of the study.

"This research shows that it's the child's perspective of conflict that has the greatest effect on later sense of purpose and what matters most in this equation is the child's relationship with his or her mother," he said.

As defined by the study, a sense of purpose involves having the belief that one has a stable, far-reaching aim that organizes and stimulates behaviors and goals to promote progress toward that objective.

While having a sense of purpose is important to setting goals and picking careers, studies show it also plays a key role in motivating [children](#) to develop the life skills necessary for independence—learning how to cook, stick to a budget, buy insurance and a host of other day-to-day survival skills that millennials now refer to as "adulting."

The study is one of the first to show long-term associations between a child's reports of early life experiences and whether that child feels purposeful later in life.

Children who reported conflicted early relations with fathers were negatively influenced by the experience, but the negative impact on sense of purpose was not nearly as strong as it was found to be among children who reported early conflicts with [mothers](#). Childhood reports of conflicts with fathers also predicted less life satisfaction in emerging adulthood.

Again, only the child's perspective seemed to matter.

Parental reports of troubled relations with their young offspring turned out to be poor predictors of a child's later sense of purpose, the study found.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, is based on data from a long-running [Oregon study](#) of 1,074 students (50 percent female) and their parents, all of whom self-reported on levels of parent-child conflict in their families during grades 1–5.

Children and parents were asked to respond to true-or-false statements about their interactions, such as "We joke around often," "We never have fun together," or "We enjoy the talks we have." Other questions asked whether "We get angry at each other" at least once a day, three times a week, or "a lot."

Follow-up surveys, which included questions on life satisfaction and perceived stress were repeated until the students reached early adulthood (ages 21-23 years).

Sense of purpose was scored based on responses to statements such as "There is a direction in my life," "My plans for the future match with my true interests and values," "I know which direction I am going to follow in my life," and "My life is guided by a set of clear commitments."

Other questions focused on life satisfaction and perceived stress: In the past month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life, confident about your ability to handle your personal problems, that things were going your way, or that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Hill and his colleagues used this rich dataset to link what children

thought of their relationships with their parents to their attitudes about purpose in life as they were starting to enter adulthood. His co-authors include Joshua Jackson, the Saul and Louise Rosenzweig Associate Professor in Personality Science at Washington University; Leah Schultz, doctoral student in psychological and [brain sciences](#) at Washington University; and Judy Andrews, senior scientist at Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Ore.

"A growing body of literature shows that having a sense of purpose is clearly something beyond just being satisfied with your life or not feeling stressed," Schultz said. "With our design, we were able to disentangle these outcomes and see the direct relationship between parent conflict and sense of purpose."

Schultz studies the development of individual differences such as personality traits and vocational interests across the lifespan. She is particularly interested in how individuals navigate these differences in their daily lives, how they select into the environments that fit them best, and what implications better person-environment fit may have for a variety of life outcomes.

"In this study, we were able to look at factors of the parent-child relationship, like how much parents and children experience conflict," Schultz said. "But it will be important for researchers to understand, specifically, how are parents demonstrating the value of a purposeful life? How are they helping children to define and pursue their own purposeful paths? Understanding the content of those conversations can help us all understand how conversations matter to the children in our lives."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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