

# The type of psychological intervention a teen gets depends on parent's mental health

July 26 2019, by Rosanna Castro

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A parent's level of psychological distress may influence how well adolescents in the juvenile justice system respond to mental health interventions for substance use and sexual risk, according to a researcher

at FIU's Center for Children and Families.

The study found that adolescents with highly distressed parents did better with a family-based intervention, whereas adolescents with mildly or not distressed parents did better with an [adolescent](#)-only intervention.

"There is little research on how parents' mental health issues affect how well adolescents respond to psychological interventions, especially for interventions that target adolescents' use of substances and their [sexual risk](#) behaviors," said Mei Yi Ng, assistant professor in the FIU Department of Psychology and lead author of the study. "These findings may help clinicians match adolescents with the intervention that is likely to benefit them the most, especially adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system."

Researchers recruited 47 sets of parents and their adolescent children, who were charged in juvenile drug court for non-violent offenses, to participate in five sessions of a family-based or an adolescent-only intervention, intended to reduce [substance use](#) and prevent HIV.

In the family-based intervention, parents and adolescents learned strategies to handle their emotions in healthy ways, and ways to help the adolescent build the motivation and skills to avoid using substances and practicing unsafe sex. In the adolescent-only intervention, adolescents learned information about commonly abused substances, HIV and sexually transmitted infections, as well as health behaviors such as exercise and sleep.

The study found that among the teens with highly distressed parents, those who participated in family-based intervention were less likely to use marijuana and used marijuana less frequently than those who participated in the adolescent-only intervention. Among the teens with mildly distressed parents, those who participated in adolescent-only

intervention were less likely to use alcohol than those who participated in the family-based intervention.

Researchers also found that the teens with highly distressed parents engaged in a larger number of unprotected sexual acts compared to teens with mildly distressed parents, regardless of which intervention they received.

"Questionnaires or interviews that include questions about parents' [psychological distress](#) may help clinicians to identify the type of [intervention](#) that may be most helpful to each adolescent," said Ng. "This screening approach can help us improve behavioral health services for them in the future."

The study was published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

**More information:** Mei Yi Ng et al. Parent Psychological Distress: A Moderator of Behavioral Health Intervention Outcomes among Justice-Involved Adolescents, *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/jora.12512](https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12512)

Provided by Florida International University

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