

Teens who have a loving relationship with their mother are less likely to enter abusive relationships

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A mother's warmth and acceptance toward her teenagers may help

prevent those children from being in an abusive relationship later in life, even if her own marriage is contentious, according to a new University at Buffalo study.

Previous research shows that adolescents who are exposed to [marital conflict](#) at a young age are at an increased risk to experience abuse in their romantic relations. However, the new study discovered that the child's relationship with their mother serves as a buffer by potentially promoting the teen's feelings of self-worth, says Jennifer Livingston, Ph.D., lead investigator and associate professor in the UB School of Nursing.

"Children form internal working models about themselves and others based on the quality of their relationship with their [parents](#)," said Livingston. "If the primary caretaker is abusive or inconsistent, [children](#) learn to view themselves as unlovable and others as hostile and untrustworthy. But positive parenting behaviors characterized by acceptance and warmth help children form positive internal working models of themselves as lovable and worthy of respect."

The results could help in the development of interventions that prevent teens from experiencing physical, emotional or sexual relationship abuse. More than 30% of adolescents are the victim of some type of abuse by a romantic partner, says Livingston, who is also a faculty member in the UB Clinical and Research Institute on Addictions (CRIA).

The protective effects of a mother's love

The research, published this month in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, surveyed more than 140 adolescents whose parents were married or cohabitating at the time of their birth.

The families are part of an ongoing study on the development of

children of alcoholic parents. Half of the participants had at least one parent, most often the father, with an alcohol problem. The researchers examined the group due to the connection between alcoholism in fathers and family dysfunction.

"Although parental alcoholism has not been directly linked to teen dating violence, children growing up in alcoholic families experience greater exposure to marital conflict and harsh parenting in comparison to children from non-alcoholic families," said Livingston. "Clearly not all children from alcoholic families are involved in dating violence, suggesting that there are protective factors at play as well. These protective factors need to be identified to advance prevention efforts."

The participants completed surveys in eighth grade and during their junior or senior year of high school, reporting on their exposure to conflict between their parents, perception of their relationship with their mother, and any involvement in dating violence.

The study discovered that children who experienced above average levels of positive parenting behaviors from their mother in eighth grade were less likely to be involved in dating violence as a teenager, even when there were high levels of conflict in their parents' marriage.

Lower levels of warmth, responsiveness and support by the mother did not weaken the harmful effects of marital conflict on her children.

"The joint influence of parent-to-parent conflict and maternal-child interactions suggests the need for a multipronged approach to intervention that promotes communication and conflict resolution in the marriage and positive parenting behavior with the children," says Livingston. "Parents who are better able to communicate and resolve disagreements will have less conflict in the household and can model appropriate conflict resolution skills to their children. The ability to

successfully resolve conflicts should also reduce stress and enable parents to be more responsive to their child's needs."

Future studies may examine the difference in the effects of marital [conflict](#) on male and female children, or if the protective effects of positive parenting persist if the mother is the alcoholic parent.

More information: Jennifer A. Livingston et al. Teen Dating Violence in a High-Risk Sample: The Protective Role of Maternal Acceptance, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260519880165](#)

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