

Parental coaching adolescents through peer stress

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During early adolescence, especially the transition to middle school, kids face a number of challenges both socially and academically. Peer rejection, bullying, and conflict with friends are common social

stressors. These challenges can affect adolescents' ability to form positive peer relationships, a key developmental task for this age group.

Parents can act as social "coaches," offering support and advice to youth as they navigate these challenges by offering specific suggestions for facing challenges head-on or by encouraging kids' autonomy, to "figure it out" on their own. University of Illinois researchers are finding that not all kids benefit from the same types of parental coaching because kids respond to stress differently.

In a recent study, published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, researchers report on the connection between how [mothers](#) advise their children to respond to specific peer stress scenarios and youth stress responses during conversations about real peer experiences. They also identify what mothers do or say that is particularly helpful in facilitating youth adjustment and well-being in the face of these stressors.

"As we're thinking about the transition to [middle school](#), we're looking at the extent to which mothers are encouraging their child to use active, engaged [coping strategies](#), such as problem solving, help-seeking, or reframing or thinking about the situation in less threatening or negative ways," says Kelly Tu, assistant professor of human development and family studies at U of I.

The study also looks at how mothers may recognize that their children are transitioning into adolescence and looking for more autonomy and independence. "We wanted to examine the extent to which mothers are taking a step back, saying, 'I'm going to let you handle this in your own way—what you think is best or what works for you,'" Tu says.

Mothers and youth in the study participated during the transition from fifth grade to sixth grade. Mothers were given hypothetical peer stress

scenarios such as peer exclusion, peer victimization or bullying, and anxiety about meeting new peers, as well as a variety of coping suggestions. Mothers were asked to report on how they would typically advise their child to respond.

Researchers also observed conversations between youth and their mothers about real peer stress situations. Common topics that were discussed included being around kids who are rude, having problems with a friend, and being bullied, teased, or hassled by other kids.

During the conversations, researchers measured skin conductance level—the electrical activity happening in the skin as part of the physiological "fight or flight" stress response system—from youth's hands. "We assessed youths' physiological arousal during these problem-solving discussions to examine how the different levels of reactivity may indicate different needs of the adolescent," Tu explains.

For instance, greater reactivity during the conversations may reflect youths' higher levels of physiological arousal or anxiety in recalling that stressful experience and talking it through with the mother. Whereas less reactivity during the problem-solving conversation might serve as an indicator of youths' insensitivity to the stressful experience. And these different response patterns may require different parenting approaches.

"We found that mothers' active, engaged coping suggestions were more beneficial for low reactive youth. Low reactive youth may not be attending to cues in these conversations about stressful or challenging peer experiences, and so they may behave in ways that are unexpected, non-normative, or inappropriate. But when parents give them specific advice for how to manage challenging peer situations, this appears to be helpful," Tu says.

However, the same active, engaged approach predicted worse

adjustment for kids exhibiting higher arousal. "Instead, self-reliant suggestions actually predicted better adjustment for these kids," Tu explains.

"These findings are interesting because this suggests that a multi-step process might work best for kids who are exhibiting high physiological arousal related to peer problems. If you're anxious or stressed, and your parent is telling you to face the problem head on, that might actually create more anxiety.

"But when a parent gives a highly aroused [youth](#) more autonomy about how to cope with the peer stressor, this seems to be more beneficial because parents are giving them more space and time to work through the situation in their own way," Tu says. Thus, parents may want to consider the match of their coping suggestions with adolescents' stress reactivity.

The paper, "Getting under the skin: Maternal social coaching and adolescent peer adjustment," is published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

More information: Kelly M. Tu et al, Getting under the skin: Maternal social coaching and adolescent peer adjustment, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appdev.2019.101091](#)

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