

Genetics linked to childhood emotional, social and psychiatric problems

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Emotional, social and psychiatric problems in children and adolescents have been linked to higher levels of genetic vulnerability for adult depression.

University of Queensland scientists made the finding while analysing the [genetic data](#) of more than 42,000 [children](#) and adolescents from seven cohorts across Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and UK.

Professor Christel Middeldorp said researchers have also found a link with a higher genetic vulnerability for insomnia, neuroticism and body mass index.

"By contrast, study participants with higher genetic scores for [educational attainment](#) and emotional wellbeing were found to have reduced childhood problems," Professor Middeldorp said.

"We calculated a person's level of genetic vulnerability by adding up the number of risk genes they had for a specific disorder or trait, and then made adjustments based on the level of importance of each gene.

"We found the relationship was mostly similar across ages."

The results indicate there are shared [genetic factors](#) that affect a range of psychiatric and related traits across a person's lifespan.

Professor Christel Middeldorp said around 50 percent of children and adolescents with [psychiatric problems](#), such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), continue to experience mental disorders as adults, and are at risk of disengaging with their school community among other social and emotional problems.

"Our findings are important as they suggest this continuity between childhood and adult traits is partly explained by genetic risk," Professor Christel Middeldorp said.

"Individuals at risk of being affected should be the focus of attention and targeted treatment..

"Although genetic [vulnerability](#) is not accurate enough at this stage to make individual predictions about how a person's symptoms will develop over time, it may become so in the future, in combination with other risk factors.

"And, this may support precision medicine by providing targeted treatments to children at the highest risk of persistent emotional and social problems."

The study was published in journal *JAMA Psychiatry*.

More information: Wonuola A. Akingbuwa et al. Genetic Associations Between Childhood Psychopathology and Adult Depression and Associated Traits in 42 998 Individuals, *JAMA Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0527](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0527)

Provided by University of Queensland

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