

Teens who struggle in relationships suffer premature aging in adulthood

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A new study from the lab of an adolescent psychologist at the University of Virginia has found more evidence that teens who are not adept at managing relationships will show physical signs of premature aging as

adults.

"Teenagers who don't learn to manage the give and take of relationships with their peers, who can't handle disagreements in a way that also preserves relationships, and also don't stick up for themselves, their bodies have aged more by age 30," said Joseph Allen, the Hugh Kelly Professor of Psychology.

Allen said some [young people](#) immediately get angry and hostile when struggling with their peers during a disagreement, while others back down repeatedly, unwilling to express their own preferences or point of view. Both approaches, he said, are unhealthy.

"The kids who do well, in contrast, are kids who are able to disagree without being disagreeable and to look for [common interests](#) and to sort of manage the fact that people have different interests," he said

He added that the ability to cope starts at home, based on how parents manage disagreements with their children, cueing the child's behavior.

These dynamics create a snowball effect. Allen said the [teen years](#) are ground zero for learning to practice with adult-like relationships, and teens who figure it out do well later in life. Those who do not are setting themselves up for a life of chronic stress that leads to a slew of health problems.

That evidence was found studying the individual's [epigenomes](#)—those biological marks found on DNA and histone proteins (the spools around which DNA wind) that determine how well (or poorly) a cell will function.

"The epigenome is what tells genes when to turn on and when to turn off," Allen said. Over time, a well-functioning epigenome in childhood

can get "rusty" for those with a history of poor [relationship](#) management.

"The best analogy is that it's like a CD or a DVD that gets scratched. The information might still be there, but it doesn't get conveyed as well, and the result is our body doesn't function as well," he said.

Because of this damage, scientists are capable of scanning people's blood and seeing into the future.

"We can take your blood and run it through this process and get a marker of your age that's a better predictor of how healthy you're going to be in the next few years and a better predictor of how long you're going to live than your actual chronological age," he said.

The discovery about youth conflict and aging is the latest finding from Allen's longitudinal study of 184 participants, which began in Charlottesville in 1998 when participants were just 13 years old. Over the years, the study's participants, along with their close friends and romantic partners, have been observed repeatedly, through age 30.

The latest report comes on the heels of a 2018 finding that chronic teen conflict has links to [premature aging](#). Both findings were published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*.

Parents, take note

Allen said this latest finding is "the strongest overall finding in terms of predicting adult health. But it's really kind of the most recent in a whole sequence of findings that are coming to the same conclusion."

That conclusion is this: Parents and adults in general need to recognize the importance of teen relationships.

"The important take-home message is that adults really downplay and minimize the importance of teens' peer relationships," he said. "At the very least, they say "Teenagers are just way too concerned about their peers. They treat these like matters of life and death."

"What we're finding is that the teens are right. These are matters of life and death to some extent, and the teens know in their bones that these relationships and learning to manage them is going to be critical to their long-term functioning in adulthood, both physically and mentally."

More information: Joseph P. Allen et al, Adolescent peer struggles predict accelerated epigenetic aging in midlife, *Development and Psychopathology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1017/S0954579422000153](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579422000153)

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