

Positive neighbor involvement important if teens don't develop mother-child bond

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Teens who live in neighborhoods with trusted, engaged adults can still develop critical social skills that were not nurtured early in life,

according to a new University of Michigan study.

Previous studies have shown the importance of early mother-child bonding that contributes to teens having social skills, such as positive behaviors that optimize relationships with others, solid academic performance and self-management of emotions.

But what happens when that connection isn't formed? Social cohesion—or the trust and bonds among neighbors—can benefit the adolescents, researchers said.

The study focused on social skills among 15-year-olds as a function of early attachment between mothers—also considered primary caregivers—and their 3-year-old kids, as well as neighborhood social cohesion.

Data from 1,883 [children](#) ages 1, 3 and 15 came from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally representative study of children born in 20 U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000.

The present study asked 39 questions to determine the children's attachment, such as "is easily comforted by contact or interaction with mother when crying or otherwise distressed." A [higher score](#) indicated a greater level of security in the child's attachment with the mother.

To measure adolescent social skills, behavior questions were asked of the 15-year-old participants. High scores in child attachment were positively correlated with increased adolescent social skills, the study showed.

At age 3, some of the traits reflecting closeness would be "hugs or cuddles with mother without being asked to do so," "responds positively to helpful hints from mother," and "when a mother says follow, child

does so willingly."

High scores in neighborhood social cohesion at age 3 were positively correlated with increased adolescent social skills. And when the bond between the mother-child wasn't strong, the impact neighbors had on kids' social skills was important, the research indicated.

"Children who live in [neighborhoods](#) with a high degree of social cohesion may have more opportunities to engage within their community and interact with other trusted adults, as well as form friendships with children," said study lead author Sunghyun Hong, a doctoral student of social work and psychology.

These connections with other sources of support may be the [driving force](#) behind the buffering impact of social cohesion on [social skills](#) for children who had insecure attachments to their caregivers

"This underscores the value of children having access to supportive and loving relationships with the mother and the surrounding community, even from [early childhood](#)," Hong said.

The data was collected in the late 90s to early 20s, in which mothers were frequently the primary caregivers. However, in recent decades, the definition of primary caregivers has been expanding with families having diverse forms, including more fathers who are engaged in co-parenting and are the sole primary caregiver. Thus, if the research involved father, the study's results would be similar, Hong said.

The findings, which appear in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, show that living in a neighborhood with high [social cohesion](#) is as important as having high attachment security to the mother, she said.

"This means that when we think about policies and programs to empower our children in the community, we must consider directly supporting the family relations and investing in their surrounding community relations," Hong said.

More information: Sunghyun Hong et al, The moderating role of neighborhood social cohesion on the relationship between early mother-child attachment security and adolescent social skills: Brief report, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/02654075221118096](https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075221118096)

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