

Kids who feel their parents are less reliable take fewer risks vital to learning and growth, study finds

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Trying something new is a risk every child undertakes as they explore and learn about the world. While risk can be costly, it can also pay off in

rewards or knowledge. But new research suggests children without predictable support from the adults in their lives are less willing to take those risks—and reap those rewards.

"If you're in a resource-rich environment—meaning for a child that you're safe, your meals are coming, someone is at home for you, you're surrounded by adults that are protecting you—you'll try new things," says Seth Pollak, a University of Wisconsin–Madison professor of psychology who studies [childhood adversity](#). "And that's how you discover and learn about the world."

But not every exploration will be rewarding, and according to [a new study](#) of childhood exploration and parental predictability that Pollak and collaborators today published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, [kids](#) who don't believe they have the support of reliable parents are less willing to risk the unknown.

"What's unseen around that corner could be golden, but you could also end up in some bad situations," Pollak says. "You could end up ordering a bad meal or touching something that hurts you. You could end up in a bad relationship or with an empty wallet. And so, we thought, in order to have the confidence to try something new, you have to feel like you're supported and relatively safe—like you can afford to make a bad call."

The researchers studied decisions that more than 150 children ages 10 to 13 made while playing games designed by C. Shawn Green, a UW–Madison psychology professor. The games offered the children opportunities to risk a little and explore for potential gains.

One game, fashioned after a pair of casino slot machines, gave players a history of payouts on just one of the machines—information that helped them understand their expected winnings if they kept pulling that machine's handle. The other machine's history was a mystery, and

investing a pull there was more of a risk, but also potentially a bigger return.

The other game, in which the kids collected apples in virtual orchards, featured diminishing returns as players continued to pick from an individual tree. With limited time, would the players move to new trees, with unknown bounties? Or would they plug away at the tree they knew best?

The kids and their parents also participated in a battery of surveys and assessments. The researchers gauged the stress the children experience and the predictability of their lives—based on factors like parental job loss, divorce, death or illness in the family, and changing schools and homes—as well as children's own views about whether or not their parents were reliable and predictable.

Yuyan Xu, a UW–Madison graduate student and first author of the study, asked children to respond to questions about how they've experienced their relationships, such as: When my parents say they're going to pick me up, can I count on them to be there? When my parent makes a promise, do they follow through on it? Do I typically know how my parents are going to react to different kinds of situations?

The less reliable and predictable the kids felt their parents were, the less likely they were to take exploratory risks in the games they played. They were less likely to give the mysterious slot machine a chance or choose to move to a different apple tree.

"The children from more stable backgrounds, they play around and experiment in our games. They use that to get a sense of how things work, maybe earning them more money or more points," Pollak says. "Kids from unstable backgrounds just don't play that way. They stay within a narrower range of possibilities. They prefer to stick with what

they already know, even if it's limited, rather than taking a chance at a higher possible reward."

The researchers found those self-imposed limits on risk were not related to the more objective measures of stress and unpredictability on the kids' lives or even on parental reports that didn't necessarily agree with their child's perceptions of their relationships. There wasn't a correlation between lack of risk-taking and levels of anxiety or neuroses, or of the kids' feelings about the rest of the world outside their family. If they felt their parents were unreliable and unpredictable, they were less willing to explore.

"I think it makes sense," Pollak says. "Their brains are doing exactly what we want our brains to do, right? If you really feel things are not predictable and you don't know how things are going to land, you'd stick to what works and what's familiar. You wouldn't waste your resources on something that could all fall apart."

The researchers ran their experiments first with a group of nearly 80 kids, then repeated it with a second group of just over 80 more to confirm their results.

"The interesting thing here is that there seems to be a way in which our early childhood experiences are calibrating how we decide to make these decisions years and years down the line and in these really different kinds of situations," says Xu.

Openness to exploration wouldn't be the only important aspect of childhood enhanced by stability. Language development, [sleep quality](#), stress regulation and other subjects of childhood development research have been tied to predictability in children's lives. Pollak plans to delve further into the relationship between predictability and exploration to see how rifts might be healed.

"What can we do for kids who view their history of interpersonal relationships as unstable?" he says. "We might not be able to change the relationships by the time we understand them to be unpredictable. But could we change the way kids think about them, how they act on them? If that is flexible, maybe we can tune those kids into the benefits and rewards of exploration to help foster kids' learning."

More information: Yuyan Xu et al, Childhood unpredictability and the development of exploration, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2303869120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2303869120)

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