

Parental warmth during young adulthood found to decrease rates of depression in children

January 31 2024, by Mary Campbell



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Parents with young adult children can still make an impact on their children's mental health, whether those children have left the nest or not.

Researchers from the Penn State College of Health and Human Development found that experiences of parental warmth during young adulthood—from 19 to 26 years of age—led to decreased rates of depression.

"This is good news for parents," said Gregory Fosco, professor of [human development](#) and [family studies](#), Edna P. Bennett Faculty Fellow in Prevention Research and co-author of this research. "Parenting is ongoing; it doesn't stop when your kids become adults. You can still help them by being warm and supportive."

When parents encourage children in their goals, listen to them, try to understand their point of view and convey pride in their accomplishments, they show parental warmth.

While early experiences with parental warmth matter later in life because they set the stage for parent and child relationships, maintaining parental warmth can help combat young adult [depression](#) well into adulthood, according to results published in [*Development and Psychopathology*](#).

To examine how parents of older children can affect depression, the Penn State research team used data from the Promoting School-Community-University Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER) trial, an evidence-based program designed by Penn State and the University of Iowa to provide substance use interventions in 28 [school districts](#) in rural and semi-rural areas of Pennsylvania and Iowa.

The program gathered data using surveys of middle and [high school students](#) from 6th through 12th grades. After high school, 1,988 of these youth were surveyed three more times at ages 19, 23 and 25, to gather data about young adulthood.

According to lead author Shichen Fang, former postdoctoral researcher at Penn State and current postdoctoral researcher at Concordia University, the findings from the study are robust.

"Parental warmth is always associated with lower levels of young adult depression," Fang said. "And it doesn't matter whether those young adult children have left home or not. Whether living at home or communicating with parents via phone or text, parental warmth always matters."

The researchers used multiple waves of data to look at differences in how parental warmth and young adult depression correlate over time. They considered differences between mothers and fathers and differences in the child's gender, but the data consistently told the same story: warmth matters.

Parental warmth was not a panacea, however. The researchers said that, before the study, they thought that parental warmth during adolescence might be associated with lower depression during young adulthood. But while parental warmth during adolescence was associated with lower depression for 19-year-old individuals, it was not correlated with depression once those children grew to be 23 or 25. Instead, sustained parental warmth during young adulthood was a key factor in these later early-adult years.

According to the researchers, this result indicates that parental warmth has an immediate impact on depression rather than fortifying someone for possible depression later in their development.

As a parent, Fosco said this research was very personal, and overall, the results surprised him.

"I really thought early experiences during adolescence would be more

important and have a more enduring effect," he said. "I underestimated the impact of more current and enduring parent and child relationships."

Little is known about how to parent adult children, according to Fosco.

"All of our attention goes into parenting kids when they are at home, but the reality is that young adults spend a lot of time with their parents—more now than in past generations," he said.

"We don't know enough about the role that parents play in supporting success in their adult children's lives. It's an important time to support them, and we're still learning about how we can do our best as parents."

More information: Shichen Fang et al, Parental warmth and young adult depression: A comparison of enduring effects and revisionist models, *Development and Psychopathology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/S0954579423001207](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579423001207)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Parental warmth during young adulthood found to decrease rates of depression in children (2024, January 31) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-01-parental-warmth-young-adulthood-decrease.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--