

# Stressed parents could mean more self-harm by kids

February 29 2024, by Dennis Thompson

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Teens have a higher risk of self-injury—deliberately cutting or burning

themselves—if they have a fraught relationship with a struggling parent, a new study shows.

Teenagers were nearly five times more likely to self-injure if, when they were 6, their moms and dads reported stress and discomfort in their role as parents, researchers found.

Teens also had a nearly doubled risk of self-harm if they perceived parental hostility and negativity at the age of 6, researchers report.

"Stress in parents is hypothesized to have widespread negative impacts on [child development](#), including the development of behavioral problems," said researchers Tove Wichstrom and Lars Wichstrom, of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim.

"It is therefore possible that increased stress contributes to the emergence of risk factors in children," including a higher risk of self-injury, they added.

For the study, the researchers analyzed data from 759 Norwegian adolescents at ages 12, 14 or 16 to determine the teens' rate of non-suicidal self-injury.

About 10% of the teens reported self-injury within the past year, with girls nearly 12 times more likely than boys to cut, burn or otherwise injure themselves.

Such self-injury is typically a way to cope with [emotional pain](#), sadness, anger and stress, according to the Mayo Clinic. It's rarely meant as a [suicide attempt](#), but rather as a means of finding calm and releasing physical and emotional tension.

The researchers linked that self-injury information to other data

collected from the children's parents, teachers and the kids themselves when they were 6.

The adults responded to questions regarding their parenting stress levels regarding their 6-year-old, including their feelings of social competence (dealing with [social situations](#)), isolation, depression and healthy attachment to their child.

At the same time, the 6-year-olds were asked about their parent's negativity, hostility and emotional availability.

The results found an association between later [self-injury](#) as a teen and a strained relationship with an overwhelmed parent at age 6.

This fraught relationship did not need to be extreme to influence the child. Researchers noted there were few reported instances of parental sexual abuse or [physical abuse](#) among the Norwegian teens.

"Preventive efforts and policies that reduce parenting stress and parents' hostility and negativity toward their children might be called for," the researchers concluded.

These types of interventions are available, they noted, but unfortunately, there is a "lack of wide-scale implementations of such programs."

The new study was published Feb. 26 in the [Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#).

**More information:** The Mayo Clinic has more about [non-suicidal self-injury](#).

Tove Wichstrøm et al, Childhood Predictors of Nonsuicidal Self-Injury in Adolescence: A Birth Cohort Study, *Journal of the American*

*Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2023.12.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2023.12.013)

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