

# Adoption study links child behavior issues with mother's trauma

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Mothers' childhood experiences of trauma can predict their children's behavior problems, even when the mothers did not raise their children, who were placed for adoption as newborns, a new University of Oregon

study shows.

The research team, led by Leslie Leve, a professor in the UO College of Education and scientist with the Prevention Science Institute, found a link between birth mothers who had experienced stressful childhood events, such as abuse, neglect, violence or poverty, and their children's behavior problems. This was true even though the children were raised by their adoptive parents and were never directly exposed to the stresses their birth mothers had experienced.

If a child's adoptive mother also experienced stressful events as a child, then the child's behavior issues were even more pronounced, the researchers found.

The paper was published in the journal [\*Development and Psychopathology\*](#).

This research underscores the importance of efforts to prevent [child neglect](#), poverty, and sexual and [physical abuse](#), and to intervene with help and support when children experience them.

"We can't always prevent bad things from happening to young children," Leve said. "But we can provide behavioral health supports to individuals who have been exposed to [childhood trauma](#) or neglect to help them develop coping skills and support networks, so that difficult childhood experiences are less likely to negatively impact them—or the [next generation](#)."

Leve is the Lorry Lokey Chair in Education and head of the counseling psychology and human services department.

In the only study of its kind, Leve and other researchers have followed 561 adopted children, their birth parents and adoptive parents for more

than a decade. Participants were recruited through 45 adoption agencies in 15 states nationwide. The researchers collected data from the birth parents when children in the study were infants and from the [adoptive parents](#) when the children were age six to seven and again at age 11.

The researchers found when birth mothers reported more [adverse childhood experiences](#) and other life stress when they were young, their children showed less "effortful control" at age seven. Examples of "effortful control" include the child being able to wait before initiating new activities when asked and being able to easily stop an activity when told "No."

At age 11, the children of these same mothers showed more "externalizing behavior," such as rule-breaking and aggressive behavior.

The study also points the way for additional inquiry. For example, exactly how does stress in one generation become associated with behavior in the next generation?

"We know from nonhuman animal studies that stress can change the expression of genes by essentially changing which genes are turned "on" or "off" when passed on to the next generation," Leve said. "That could be a plausible pathway."

Further, what is the effect of the environment in which the child was raised?

"Can we find something positive in the rearing environment, perhaps parents' warmth or sensitivity, that can help offset the child's genetic or biologic risk for impulsive or externalizing behavior?" Leve asked. That is the next question the research team is asking.

**More information:** Leslie D. Leve et al, The pernicious role of stress on intergenerational continuity of psychopathology, *Development and Psychopathology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/S0954579424000191](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579424000191)

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