

Relationship study says parental acceptance in childhood predicts ability to forgive as adults

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The ability to forgive and forget might not be as easy for some as it is for others, a new study suggests, as the skill is developed in people

through the strength of their earliest relationships—with their parents.

A study of nearly 1,500 adolescents and adults in five predominantly Muslim countries has found that parental acceptance in childhood is associated with a predisposition for forgiveness in adulthood, while parental [rejection](#)—by mother, father, or both—leads to a tendency for vengeance when one is grown.

It's a finding that Ronald P. Rohner, UConn professor emeritus and director of the Center for the Study of Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection, says isn't surprising based on his 60 years of research into human relationships worldwide.

"Understanding how we process the feeling of being cared about or not is fundamentally important for predicting what our behavior is going to be in ways we normally don't expect," he says.

"We have found, for example, that the image of God among adults who were rejected in childhood is qualitatively different from the image of God among adults who were accepted," Rohner adds.

"Feeling loved or not loved in childhood goes on to influence the kind of art you prefer and the kind of music you like. These dispositions are not mere coincidences."

After studying the responses of several hundred thousand people during his six-decade career, Rohner says that almost without exception, people everywhere—regardless of gender, race, and culture—understand themselves to be cared about or not in the same four ways.

And when they don't feel loved, a cluster of 10 things usually happen—including anxiety, insecurity, and anger, which can lead to things like suicide ideation and substance abuse.

A recent study from Sumbleen Ali '21 Ph.D., with Rohner and HDFS professor Preston A. Britner, put a group of young adults who experienced parental rejection in childhood in an MRI and showed them a virtual experience meant to trigger a sense of rejection. Right away, the [pain receptors](#) in the brain lit up.

"When somebody hurts your feelings, that's not simply a metaphor. That is pain," says Rohner, who taught in UConn's departments of Anthropology and Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS).

"The difference with [physical pain](#) is you'll remember your toe hurt when you stubbed it three weeks ago, but you won't feel that pain," he continues. "With rejection, every time you think about it, it can light up your brain in the same way as when you first experienced it. Your childhood rejection experiences can bully you for the rest of your life."

A religious dimension to forgiveness

All this is part of Rohner's interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory, known as [IPARTheory](#). It's an evidence-based theory of socialization and lifespan development.

Rohner says he recently started to wonder whether parental acceptance affects the ability to forgive, and, with Ali, put out an international call asking for researchers who would be interested in collaborating to find out.

The loudest response came from colleagues in the predominantly Muslim countries of Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey.

Rohner and Ali, along with Jennifer Lansford from Duke University, gathered data from partners in these parts of the world, publishing the [article](#), "Memories of Parental Acceptance and Rejection Predict

Forgiveness and Vengeance in the Muslim World: Introduction and Overview," in *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*.

The article, one of only several in recent years that have looked at forgiveness vs. vengeance, is part of a special journal issue out this month that was edited by Rohner and Ali.

More information: Ronald P. Rohner et al, Memories of Parental Acceptance and Rejection Predict Forgiveness and Vengeance in the Muslim World: Introduction and Overview, *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00221325.2023.2292031](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2023.2292031)

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