

# Early family depression has lasting effects on teens, young adults

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The country's economic crisis could have lasting effects on children from families that fall into poverty, according to a new paper by researchers from Iowa State University's Institute for Social and Behavioral Research.

Their study of 485 Iowa adolescents over a 10-year period (1991-2001) found that early socioeconomic adversity experienced by children contributes to poor mental health by the time they become teens -- disrupting their successful transition into adulthood by endangering their social, academic and occupational attainment as young adults.

"The main finding shows the continuity of family adversity over generations -- from family-of-origin to a young adult's family. In other words, it's the transmission of poverty," said K.A.S. Wickrama, an ISU professor of human development and family studies and the study's lead researcher.

"Other articles have shown intergenerational transmission of adversity, but our study also shows the mechanisms that this influence operates through," he said. "We had the luxury of data to investigate that because we have been following 500 Iowa families since 1989."

Wickrama collaborated with Fred Lorenz, ISU University Professor of psychology; Tony Jung, an ISU graduate student in human development and family studies; and Rand D. Conger, a Distinguished Professor of human and community development at the University of California-Davis, on the study. They authored the paper "Family Antecedents and Consequences of Trajectories of Depressive Symptoms from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: A Life Course Investigation," which was published in the December issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, a professional journal.

Since 1989, the researchers have been studying more than 500 families from an eight-county area

northwest of Ames in the Iowa Youth and Families Project. For this study, they assessed the family-of-origin's socioeconomic status in 1991 by using measures of family structure and parental education, as well as the number of family negative life events.

The researchers then determined the number of early life events by the adolescent subjects -- such as experiencing cohabitation, pregnancy, parenthood, marriage, or leaving home at an earlier than average age. They also measured depressive symptoms exhibited from adolescence to young adulthood by the subjects, as well as their social status attainment as young adults.

They found that family adversity persists in children by initiating depressive symptoms in adolescence. That influence increases the occurrence of early disruptive life events.

"Our research shows that if you rush to adulthood, it is very stressful because you are not ready for that," Wickrama said. "These two mechanisms, early events and depressive symptoms, mutually reinforce each other and ultimately contribute to failures in young adulthood -- such as low educational level, unemployment, poor close relations, poor parent relationships and less social participation."

Nearly one-fifth of young adult failures were attributed by subjects to depressive symptoms in adolescence. Girls also had significantly higher initial levels of depressive symptoms than boys.

In their paper, the researchers conclude that young people from poor families are particularly vulnerable to becoming "trapped in the self-perpetuating cycle of adverse life circumstances and poor health." They wrote that their findings emphasize the need for more federally funded programs to convey resilience in coping with mental health risks.

"What needs to be done is enhance the kids' resiliency factors -- such as investing in kids' education and psychological competency programs," Wickrama said. "The policies and intervention programs need to focus on early intervention. That is the real lesson, because early levels of depression have a persistent influence. So you need to intervene early in childhood and adolescence -- not when they become young adults."

The research team will continue studying families in the Iowa Youth and Families Project. They plan to try to pinpoint social, behavioral and psychological competencies through which changes in symptoms over time influence young adult social status attainment.

Source: Iowa State University

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