

# Marriage, education can help improve well-being of adults abused as children

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Researchers investigating the long-term consequences of child abuse have identified some protective factors that can improve the health of victims during their adulthood.

Men and women in their 30s who had been abused or neglected as children reported worse mental and physical health than their non-abused peers. But being married or having graduated from high school buffered the severity of their symptoms.

The researchers also found that adults who experienced child abuse reported less happiness and self-esteem, more anger and other psychological damage, indicating child abuse has wider-ranging effects than previously known.

"As we understand more of how individuals overcome early trauma, we can develop programs to support and nurture kids exposed to abuse," said Todd Herrenkohl, professor in the University of Washington's School of Social Work.

Herrenkohl is the lead author of two new studies examining what factors can mitigate the harm of maltreatment during childhood. He used data from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, which began in the 1970s to evaluate the consequences of experiencing violence at a young age.

Participants became involved in the study if their parents were reported to child welfare agencies for abuse or neglect. Parents were also asked about a range of disciplinary practices that are considered abusive, such as slapping and leaving a bruise, kicking, hitting or biting. Neglect involved depriving children of necessities, such as food, [medical attention](#) and hygiene.

The study's participants, an even mix of men and women, are now in their late 30s. Herrenkohl and his [collaborators](#) got back in touch with them, and interviewed more than 80 percent of the original

participants, about half of whom were earlier abused. The researchers wanted to know how the participants were faring in their [adult lives](#) and asked about mental and physical health, use of drugs and alcohol, quality of relationships with family and friends, education, employment and overall well-being and satisfaction in life.

In a study published online Sept. 28 in the *Journal of Family Violence*, Herrenkohl and his co-authors reported that childhood abuse led to worse mental and [physical health](#) and substance abuse in [adulthood](#). For instance, 24 percent of child abuse survivors reported moderate to severe depression – a level that could be debilitating – compared with 7 percent of participants who had not been abused.

About 19 percent of the survivors reported problems with alcohol over their lifetimes, whereas only 10 percent of the non-abused participants reported these problems.

Being married or a high-school graduate partly lowered, but did not eliminate, the risk for depression among those who had been abused. Survivors who graduated high school had a lower risk for lifetime alcohol problems.

Surprisingly, gender and early childhood socioeconomic status had little bearing on the long-term effects of abuse. "The expectation is that growing up in a household with a higher income and higher social status will help kids, but child maltreatment erases those advantages," Herrenkohl said.

In a second study, published in the November issue of *Violence and Victims* and also based on interviews with the adults from the Lehigh [Longitudinal Study](#), Herrenkohl and his co-authors explored anger proneness, self-esteem, sense of independence, satisfaction in life and other measures of well-being that studies of [child abuse](#) typically ignore. Child maltreatment was linked to

lower scores on most of these well-being measures when compared with scores from individuals who hadn't been abused.

"The results show that the effects of child [maltreatment](#) extend beyond the most common mental health diagnoses," Herrenkohl said. "It shows that adults abused as children experience the emotional consequences of early trauma well into their adult years."

The paper published in the *Journal of Family Violence* was funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse – all part of the National Institutes of Health. Co-authors are Seunghye Hong of the University of Hawaii, Bart Klika of UW, and Roy Herrenkohl (Todd Herrenkohl's father) and M. Jean Russo of Lehigh University.

The paper published in *Violence and Victims* was funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Klika, Roy Herrenkohl, Russo and Tamara Dee, formerly of UW, were co-authors.

**More information:**

*Journal of Family Violence:*

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