Medical Xpress

Stressful experiences have big, immediate effects on children's health

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(Medical Xpress)—Science has shown that children who experience stressful events are more likely to face poor health outcomes as adults, but new research shows the effects may show up much sooner—in fact, almost immediately.

Researchers at the University of Florida discovered that when children experience three or more stressful events, they are six times more likely to suffer from a mental, physical or learning disorder than children who didn't face these traumatic experiences, said Melissa Bright, a research coordinator for the UF Institute of Child Health Policy, or ICHP. Bright will present her findings at the American Psychosomatic Society's annual meeting today (March 12) in San Francisco.

"The kids who have the highest number of adverse experiences have the highest likelihood of having multiple conditions," Bright said. "It is not one poor health outcome; it is a whole slew of poor outcomes across the board."

UF researchers analyzed data collected as part of the National Survey for Child Health, which included nearly 96,000 children from across the United States. The survey contains data on the number of adverse experiences the children faced, including parental divorce, economic hardship, exposure to domestic and neighborhood violence, poor caregiver mental health, exposure to drug abuse and having a parent in jail. The parents also reported on any conditions their children had.

According to the study, between 11 and 24 percent of parents reported that their children had been diagnosed with at least one disorder. About 4 percent of parents reported that their children had at least one disorder from all three categories—mental, learning and physical. Children who had faced adverse experiences were more likely to have a disorder in every category than children who had not.

The culprit could be chronic toxic stress, which researchers believe prompts changes to the body's developing neuroendocrine and immune systems, Bright said. These changes can lead to poor regulation of the stress response and a decreased ability to fight disease.

In 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement endorsing increased efforts to combat the effects of toxic stress on healthy brain growth in children.

"These adverse experiences are affecting multiple domains of health simultaneously," she said. "We need a holistic approach to tackle this issue."

Although the study showed that adverse experiences are linked to an increased risk for various health conditions, the researchers don't yet know if those experiences cause the conditions to occur, Bright said.

"It is also possible that having a child with multiple health conditions puts serious financial and emotional strains on families, making them more susceptible to adverse experiences such as caregiver mental illness and divorce," she said. "We are currently collecting data for a new study in which we plan to examine this possibility."

In the next phase of her research, Bright also hopes to look more closely at the neuroendocrine and immune system changes and their link to poor health outcomes in childhood.

"If we can identify these changes early on, then we can develop interventions to hopefully prevent some of these poor outcomes," she said.

Provided by University of Florida

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