

How mother-youth emotional climate helps adolescents cope with stress

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Summary: Transition to middle school can be a stressful time for adolescents. They must adjust to a new peer group and social environment while going through the developmental changes of puberty. A recent study looks at how emotional aspects of parenting can help youth better cope with peer stressors during this transitional period.

FULL STORY

Transition to middle school can be a stressful time for adolescents. They must adjust to a new peer group and social environment while going through the developmental changes of puberty. A recent University of Illinois study looks at how emotional aspects of parenting can help youth better cope with peer stressors during this transitional period.

The researchers evaluated emotional closeness between fifth-graders and their mothers, gauging how it predicted the youths' ability to deal with social challenges when they started middle school the following year. They combined observations of mother-youth interactions with measures of the youths' biological stress response capacity.

The study is part of a larger, ongoing project in the research lab of Kelly Tu, examining the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents and the role of parental involvement. Tu is an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) at U of I, and co-author on the paper.

"Adolescents often turn to their mothers to discuss peer problems. As mothers give advice, it's not just *what* they tell adolescents that matter, but also *how* they are conveying those messages. Therefore, moving beyond mothers' specific suggestions for coping, here we focus on the emotional climate of these conversations," explains Xiaomei Li, doctoral candidate in HDFS and the paper's lead author.

The researchers invited mothers and adolescents in the last semester of fifth grade to the research lab, asking them to spend five minutes talking about a peer problem the youth was facing. The youth also filled out questionnaires reporting on how they typically cope with peer stress, once during fifth grade and again after they started sixth grade the following school year. Being able to engage in active forms of coping -- attempting to resolve the problem and managing one's reactions -- is typically considered more beneficial for youths' successful adaptation to new environments, the researchers say.

During the five-minute conversation, trained observers rated maternal affect (such as smiles, physical and verbal affection, frustration or tension) and dyadic connection or cohesiveness (such as taking turns and communicating smoothly). The researchers also measured youths' biological response in the form of their respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), gauging the baseline RSA at rest while they watched a slide show of nature images. RSA measures the variations in heart rate, and higher baseline RSA indicates greater capacity to respond to stressful situations by regulating the heart rate.

"Stress response is a multi-level mechanism which includes behavioral strategies and biological reactions. We wanted to observe how some common biological markers of the stress response system might inform how youth engage in behavioral strategies to cope with stress, in addition to how their mothers may support them," Li says.

Youth who experienced more positive affect and greater cohesiveness during their conversations with mothers reported more active coping and advice seeking from parents in middle school. In comparison, youth whose mothers displayed less positive affect (or more criticism and lack of interest) and who were less cohesive with their children during the conversation were less able to actively cope with social stress when starting middle school. This was particularly noticeable for kids with lower baseline RSA.

"For some youth who may be biologically dispositioned to be vulnerable to stress, such as displaying lower baseline RSA, the mother's positive, warm affect and a cohesive, collaborative conversation atmosphere appear to be especially important for the development and use of active coping," Li says.

One takeaway from these findings is for parents to think about how to create a positive and supportive space to talk with their children about their problems, Tu explains.

"As a parent, you could be giving great advice. But what our study shows is that *how* parents talk with their children matters for how adolescents cope with stress. Conversations that are less warm and supportive could undermine parents' efforts to help. And youth are less likely to seek parents' advice in the future," she adds.

Tu and Li say there may also be cultural differences in parental emotional closeness and how much it matters to youth. Study participants included a diverse sample of 57% White, 10% Black, 13% Hispanic/Latino, 6% Asian, and 14% other/mixed race. While the ethnic groups were too small to analyze separately, the researchers recognize the need to better understand cultural factors in future studies.

Story Source:

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Journal Reference:

1. Xiaomei Li, Kelly M. Tu, Nancy L. McElwain. **Interactive Contribution of Observed Mother-Youth Emotional Climate and Youth Physiology: A Biopsychosocial Approach to Understanding Youth Coping With Peer Stress**. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 2022; 027243162210960 DOI: 10.1177/02724316221096079

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