

Young children who are close to their parents are more likely to grow up kind, helpful and 'prosocial'

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Summary: A new study indicates a strong connection between early parent-child relationships and the likelihood that children will grow up to display socially-desirable characteristics like kindness and empathy. Using data from 10,000 people in the UK, researchers found that children who have a warm and loving bond with their parents at age three are not only less prone to mental health difficulties, but display heightened 'prosociality' by the time they reach adolescence. This refers to socially-desirable behaviors such as kindness, empathy, helpfulness, generosity and volunteering. Conversely, children whose early relationships with their parents were difficult or abusive were less likely to develop prosocial habits. The researchers argue that this strengthens the case for developing targeted policies to support young families within which it may be difficult to establish close early parent-child relationships.

FULL STORY

A loving bond between parents and their children early in life significantly increases the child's tendency to be 'prosocial', and act with kindness and empathy towards others, research indicates.

The University of Cambridge study used data from more than 10,000 people born between 2000 and 2002 to understand the long-term interplay between our early relationships with our parents, prosociality and mental health. It is one of the first studies to look at how these characteristics interact over a long period spanning childhood and adolescence.

The researchers found that people who experienced warm and loving relationships with their parents at age three not only tended to have fewer mental health problems during early childhood and adolescence, but also displayed heightened 'prosocial' tendencies. This refers to socially-desirable behaviours intended to benefit others, such as kindness, empathy, helpfulness, generosity and volunteering.

Although the correlation between parent-child relationships and later prosociality needs to be verified through further research, the study points to a sizeable association. On average, it found that for every standard unit above 'normal' levels that a child's closeness with their parents was higher at age three, their prosociality increased by 0.24 of a standard unit by adolescence.

Conversely, children whose early parental relationships were emotionally strained or abusive were less likely to develop prosocial habits over time. The researchers suggest this strengthens the case for developing targeted policies and support for young families within which establishing close parent-child relationships may not always be straightforward; for example, if parents are struggling with financial and work pressures and do not have much time.

The study also explored how far mental health and prosocial behaviour are fixed 'traits' in young people, and how far they fluctuate according to circumstances like changes at school or in personal relationships. It measured both mental health and prosociality at ages five, seven, 11, 14 and 17 in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the dynamics shaping these characteristics and how they interact.

The research was undertaken by Ioannis Katsantonis and Dr Ros McLellan, both from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

Katsantonis, the lead author and a doctoral researcher specialising in psychology and education, said: "Our analysis showed that after a certain age, we tend to be mentally well, or mentally unwell, and have a reasonably fixed level of resilience. Prosociality varies more and for longer, depending on our environment. A big influence appears to be our early relationship with our parents. As children, we internalise those aspects of our relationships with parents that are characterised by emotion, care and warmth. This affects our future disposition to be kind and helpful towards others."

The study used data from 10,700 participants in the Millennium Cohort Study, which has monitored the development of a large group of people born in the UK between 2000 and 2002. It includes survey-based information about their prosociality, 'internalising' mental health symptoms (such as depression and anxiety) and 'externalising' symptoms (such as aggression).

Further survey data provided information about how far the participants' relationships with their parents at age three were characterised by 'maltreatment' (physical and verbal abuse); emotional conflict; and 'closeness' (warmth, security and care). Other potentially confounding factors, like ethnic background and socio-economic status, were also taken into account.

The Cambridge team then used a complex form of statistical analysis called latent state-trait-occasion modelling to understand how far the participants' mental health symptoms and prosocial inclinations seemed to be expressing fixed personality 'traits' at each stage of their development. This enabled them, for example, to determine how far a child who behaved anxiously when surveyed was responding to a particular experience or set of circumstances, and how far they were just a naturally anxious child.

The study found some evidence of a link between mental health problems and prosociality. Notably, children who displayed higher than average externalising mental health symptoms at a younger age showed less prosociality than usual later. For example, for each standard unit increase above normal that a child displayed externalising mental health problems at age seven, their prosociality typically fell by 0.11 of a unit at age 11.

There was no clear evidence that the reverse applied, however. While children with greater than average prosociality generally had better mental health at any single given point in time, this did not mean their mental health improved as they got older. On the basis of this finding, the study suggests that schools' efforts to foster prosocial behaviours may be more impactful if they are integrated into the curriculum in a sustained way, rather than being implemented in the form of one-off interventions, like anti-bullying weeks.

As well as being more prosocial, children who had closer relationships with their parents at age three also tended to have fewer symptoms of poor mental health in later childhood and adolescence.

Katsantonis said that the findings underlined the importance of cultivating strong early relationships between parents and children, which is already widely seen as critical to supporting children's healthy development in other areas.

"So much of this comes back to parents," Katsantonis said. "How much they can spend time with their children and respond to their needs and emotions early in life matters enormously."

"Some may need help learning how to do that, but we should not underestimate the importance of simply giving them time. Closeness only develops with time, and for parents who are living or working in stressful and constrained circumstances, there often isn't enough. Policies which address that, at any level, will have many benefits, including enhancing children's mental resilience and their capacity to act positively towards others later in life."