

Helping Hand



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Early Social Experiences Can Influence Adult Relationships

The way in which individuals think, feel, and behave in their adult romantic relationships are governed not only by factors in their immediate surroundings, but are also a direct result of their past relationships and personal attachment extending all the way back to childhood, according to a study reported in a recent issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA). This study sheds light on how relationships are shaped by early experiences.

In a longitudinal study that has spanned more than 25 years (and is still being conducted), 78 individuals were studied at four pivotal points in their lives—infancy, early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. At the first checkpoint when the participants were 12 months old, caregivers reported on the children’s attachment and exploratory behavior. At the second checkpoint when the participants were 6-8 years old, the participants’ teachers were asked to rate how well the children interacted with their peers. At the third checkpoint, the 16-year-old participants were asked to describe their close friendships. At the most recent reporting, the participants’ romantic partners (of at least four months) were asked to describe their experiences and their partners’ expressions of emotion during their relationship. Interactions of the couples were also observed and coded to evaluate the expression of emotion and their interpersonal dynamics.

The findings of this study supported previous attachment theories. Expression of emotions in adult romantic relationships can be related back to a person’s attachment experiences during earlier social development. Those participants who were secure and attached as infants were rated with higher social competence as children. Children

who were socially competent amongst peers were found to be more secure and closer to their friends at age 16. Participants who were closer to friends as a teen were more expressive and emotionally attached to their romantic partners in early adulthood. “The current findings highlight one developmental pathway through which significant relationship experiences during the early years of life are tied to the daily experiences in romantic relationships during early adulthood,” said W. Andrew Collins, lead author and University of Minnesota psychology professor. “One encouraging finding, however, is that the study does not suggest that an individual’s past unalterably determines the future course of his/her relationships.” Source: “Attachment and the Experience and Expression of Emotion in Romantic Relationships: A Developmental Perspective,” Jeffry Simpson, W. Andrew Collins, Sisi Tran, and Katherine Haydon, University of Minnesota; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 92, No. 2.

Full text of the article is available at <http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/psp922355.pdf>

Sexualized Images of Girls Are Linked to Common Mental Health Problems

A report of the American Psychological Association (APA) found evidence that the proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and media is harmful to girls’ self-image and healthy development. To complete the report, the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls studied published research on the content and effects of virtually every form of media, including television, music videos, music lyrics, magazines, movies, video games and the Internet. They also examined recent advertising campaigns and merchandising of products aimed toward girls.

Sexualization was defined by the task force as occurring when a person’s value comes only from her/his sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, and when a person is sexually objectified, e.g., made into a *thing* for another’s sexual use. Examples of the sexualization of girls in all forms of media including visual media and music lyrics abound. And, according to the report, they have likely increased in number as “new media” have been created and access to media has become omnipresent. The influence and attitudes of parents, siblings, and friends can also add to the pressures of sexualization. “The consequences of the sexualization of girls in media today are very real and are likely to be a negative influence on girls’ healthy development,” says Eileen L. Zurbriggen, PhD, chair of the APA Task Force and associate professor of psychology

at the University of California, Santa Cruz. “We have ample evidence to conclude that sexualization has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development.” Research evidence shows that the sexualization of girls negatively affects girls and young women across a variety of health domains:

Cognitive and Emotional Consequences: Sexualization and objectification undermine a person’s confidence in and comfort with her own body, leading to emotional and self-image problems, such as shame and anxiety.

Mental and Physical Health: Research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women—eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood.

Sexual Development: Research suggests that the sexualization of girls has negative consequences on girls’ ability to develop a healthy sexual self-image. According to the task force report, parents can play a major role in contributing to the sexualization of their daughters or they can play a protective and educative role.

The APA report calls on parents, school officials, and all health professionals to be alert for the potential impact of sexualization on girls and young women. Schools, the APA says, should teach media literacy skills to all students and should include information on the negative effects of the sexualization of girls in media literacy and sex education programs.

“As a society, we need to replace all of these sexualized images with ones showing girls in positive settings—ones that show the uniqueness and competence of girls,” states Dr. Zurbriggen. “The goal should be to deliver messages to all adolescents—boys and girls—that lead to healthy sexual development.”

Full text of the executive summary report, and tips on “What Parents Can Do” are available at: <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>

Study Sees Spike in Methadone Overdoses

The rate of fatal overdoses attributed to methadone use increased faster than overdoses involving any other drug between 1999 and 2004, according to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

USA Today reported that fatal methadone overdoses in 2004, which totaled 3,849, rose 390% from 1999. Almost 13% of all overdose deaths in the US in 2004 involved methadone, the NCHS report said, up from 4% in 1999.

The trend is partly due to the fact that more doctors are prescribing methadone as a painkiller, seeing it as a more affordable alternative to drugs such as OxyContin. Like OxyContin and Vicodin, methadone also has a high potential for abuse. Each dose of methadone costs only a few cents, although it can fetch \$20 per pill on the street. Most people who suffer fatal methadone overdoses are drug addicts, according to Nicholas Reuter, a senior public health analyst at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Methadone also is a tricky drug to manage even when legally prescribed as a pain medication, warned the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) last fall. “Methadone may build up in the body to a toxic level if it is taken too often, if the amount taken is too high, or if it is taken with certain other medications,” the FDA reported.

Pictures Are Better Than Words for Cigarette Warnings

A study that compared cigarette warning labels from four countries concluded that those using pictorial images were more effective than textbased health messages, the BBC reported Feb. 6.

The study of labels used in the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia also found that text warnings that are large and regularly updated are noticed more than smaller, static messages. About 15,000 smokers were involved in the study.

In Canada, which uses graphic images like a photo of a drooping cigarette to drive home the link between smoking and impotence, 60% of smokers said they noticed the warnings. In Australia, which requires text warnings to cover almost a third of cigarette packs, 52% of smokers noticed the warnings. But only 30% of US smokers noticed the smaller Surgeon General’s warnings on cigarette packs required since 1984.

About 15% of Canadian smokers said the warnings had deterred them from lighting up. “This study suggests that more prominent health warnings are associated with greater levels of awareness and perceived effectiveness among smokers,” said researcher David Hammond.

The study was slated to be published in the March 2007 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Creating Successful Obesity Prevention Program for Children

As the obesity epidemic among youths and its associated risks for later health problems — heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers — grow, health researchers are

finding that many current programs aimed at preventing unhealthy weight gain fall short. And, those programs that are successful only work for short periods of time. What can work?

Brief, targeted interventions that focus on weight loss only, according to a review of the research.

These findings are reported in the September 2006 issue of *Psychological Bulletin*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA).

Psychologists from the University of Texas at Austin conducted a metaanalysis of the last 25 years of research that examined 64 programs in 46 studies to determine which programs were the best at preventing weight gain in children and adolescents.

It is estimated that 70% of obese adolescents will stay overweight as adults if they don't shed the weight in their younger years, and interventions must begin early to prevent later health problems, said lead author Eric Stice, PhD, and co-authors Heather Shaw, PhD, and C. Nathan Marti, PhD.

The intervention programs examined in the meta-analysis varied in duration, whether parents were involved, the type of content provided, dietary and activity instruction, number of behaviors targeted and types of instructors and delivery (lecture versus interactive).

Interventions that simultaneously attempted to change many health factors, such as body weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and smoking, were less effective at preventing weight gain than interventions that focused solely on body weight, said Stice. Interventions that targeted children and adolescents compared with preadolescents and those targeting females versus males were also more effective.

Furthermore, the reviewers found that prevention programs tended to produce larger effects when delivered by professionals rather than schoolteachers. According to the findings of the meta-analysis, most of the interventions failed at preventing weight gain among the youths, and the ones that were successful had only shortterm benefits lasting only three years. More research is needed to build on the existing programs that were effective in stopping weight gain, said Stice. "Programs for preadolescents and males will require new approaches because these two populations derived the least benefit from the existing programs."

Source Article: "A Meta-Analytic Review of Obesity Prevention Programs for Children and Adolescents: The Skinny on Interventions that Work," Eric Stice, PhD, Heather Shaw, PhD, and C. Nathan Marti, PhD, University of Texas at Austin, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 132, No. 5.



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