

- Child development

Loving bond makes kids likely to grow up kinder

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YOUNG children who share a “loving bond” with their parents are more likely to grow up to be kind, suggests a new study. Cambridge University researchers found that teenagers who enjoyed a close and happy relationship with their mums and dads at three-years-old tended to display more socially desirable traits such as kindness, empathy and generosity. 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.

The Cambridge team studied 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, positive social attributes and mental health.

It is one of the first studies to look at how the characteristics interact over a period of time spanning childhood and adolescence.

The findings show that people who experienced “warm and loving” relationships with their parents at age three not only tended to have fewer mental health issues during early childhood and adolescence, but also displayed heightened tendencies.

Prosocial 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 study, the researchers say their findings point 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 that strengthens the case for developing targeted policies and support for young families within which establishing close parent-child relationships may not always be straightforward; “prosocial” for example, if parents are struggling with financial or work pressures and do not have much time.

The study, published in the International Journal of Behavioural Development, 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.

The research team measured both mental health and prosociality at ages five, seven, 11, 14 and 17 in order to develop a picture of the dynamics shaping such characteristics and how they interact.

Lead author Ioannis Katsantonis, 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 physical and verbal abuse; emotional conflict; and ‘closeness’ warmth, security and care.

Mr Katsantonis says the findings underlined the importance of cultivating strong early relationships between parents and children.

He added: “So much of this comes back to parents.

“How much they can spend time with their children and respond to their needs and emotions early in life matters enormously.”