




Internalizing and externalizing.

August 2008 - Research from Ohio State University published in the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy has challenged the common perception that girls tend to internalize their problems, becoming depressed or anxious, while boys externalize, committing violence against people or property.

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- Researchers studied 2549 young people appearing before juvenile courts in five Ohio counties and found that whether African-Americans internalized or externalized their problems was dependent on family circumstances rather than gender.

- Stephen Gavazzi, professor of human development and family science said:
- "If you look at most studies involving internalizing and externalizing among youth, they generally look at white, middle-class samples. Most research has not paid attention to race. And when studies do look at race, they are not likely to look at family and gender as well."
- Researchers used their Global Risk Assessment Device (GRAD) an internet-based questionnaire for young people designed to assess risk of further problems in life and including issues such as previous involvement with the law, family and parenting, substance abuse and traumatic events. For example, respondents are asked about fights with adults in their homes, if they have friends who have been in trouble with the law, and if they have trouble controlling their anger.

- The study found that once family circumstances were taken into account African-American girls and boys showed similar levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior being more likely to show outward aggression if they lived in families with higher levels of dysfunction. This relationship was not found in white families. Researchers are currently trying to identify characteristics of African-American families that may influence these findings; for example, family conflict and levels of parental monitoring.
- Stephen Gavazzi commented:
- "Family issues affect children in African-American families differently than they do in white families. That is something that really hasn't been found before Researchers who study ethnicity and culture have long noted the primacy of family for African Americans. That's telling us that families matter in a different way for African-American youth than what we're finding for whites."

- July 2008 - Research from the University of Vermont and the University of Minnesota published in *Child Development* found that young people with pre-existing relationship difficulties are more likely to develop anxiety and depression than the other way round, this being particularly the case when entering adulthood.
- The study analyzed data from Project Competence which has followed 205 individuals from mid-childhood (ages 8 to 12) into young adulthood. Researchers interviewed participants and questioned parents, teachers, and classmates to measure "internalizing" of problems (symptoms such as anxiety, depression, or withdrawn state) compared to social competence (healthy relationships). They then assessed the on-going relationship between these parameters and whether they changed over time. Researchers found a significant degree of continuity: those with more internalizing problems at the start were more likely to experience these problems in adolescence and young adulthood; those who were socially competent maintained this as they grew up. Results were generally the same for both males and females.

- The study also found evidence of spill-over effects, where social problems contributed to increasing internalizing symptoms over time. Those who were less socially competent in childhood were more likely to experience anxiety or depression in adolescence. Similarly, lack of social competence in adolescence was associated with greater risk of such symptoms in young adulthood. These findings remained the same when alternative explanations were taken into account, such as intellectual functioning, the quality of parenting, social class, and antisocial behaviour such as fighting, lying, and stealing.
- Lead author Keith Burt, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Vermont said:
- "Overall, our research suggests that social competence, such as acceptance by peers and developing healthy relationships, is a key influence in the development of future internalizing problems such as anxiety and depressed mood, especially over the transition years from adolescence into young adulthood. These results suggest that although internalizing problems have some stability across time, there is also room for intervention and change. More specifically, youth at risk for internalizing problems might benefit from interventions focused on building healthy relationships with peers."



Happy And Unhappy Families


August 2010 - Research from the University of Rochester and the University of Notre Dame published in *Child Development* analyzed relationship patterns in 234 families with a child aged six. Consistent with long-established family systems theory, researchers found three distinct profiles: one happy, termed **cohesive**, and two unhappy, termed **disengaged** and **enmeshed**. Specific difficulties were encountered in the first years at school depending on the type of dysfunctional profile identified. This study is the first to confirm the existence of these profiles across multiple relationships within the marriage partnership and between children and parents.


Patrick Davies, professor of psychology, explained:


- "We were really able to look at the big picture of the family, and what was striking was that these family relationship patterns were not only stable across different relationships but also across time, with very few families switching patterns."


Researchers explain that:

- Cohesive families are characterized by harmonious communication, emotional warmth, and firm but flexible roles for parents and children.
- Enmeshed families may be emotionally involved and display some warmth, but experience 'high levels of hostility, destructive meddling, and a limited sense of the family as a team'.
- Disengaged families are associated with cold, controlling, and withdrawn relationships.

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- Researchers assessed families using parent and teacher reports and through direct observation. Participants came to the lab annually for three years, making two visits one week apart. Both parents and their child played Jenga, an interactive game, for 15 minutes. On alternate weeks each parent interacted alone with the child for ten minutes divided between play and clean up. Parents were also videotaped discussing two topics intended to elicit disagreement.

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- The study evaluated how parents related to one another, noting characteristics such as aggression, withdrawal, avoidance and ability to work as a team in the presence of the child. Researchers assessed the emotional availability of parents, whether they provided praise and approval or ignored the child during shared activities. They also noted how the children related to their parents, noting whether attempts to engage them were 'brief and half-hearted or sustained and enthusiastic'.

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- The study found that children from disengaged homes started school with higher levels of aggressive and disruptive behavior and more difficulty focusing and cooperating with classroom rules. These behaviors tended to increase with time. Children from enmeshed homes began with no more disciplinary problems or depression and withdrawal than those from cohesive families. However, as children from families with either type of destructive relationship pattern continued in school they began to suffer from higher levels of anxiety and feelings of loneliness combined with alienation from peers and teachers.

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- While the study identified a clear connection between family characteristics and behavior at school the researchers caution against concluding that dysfunctional relationships are responsible for the majority of difficulties encountered. They point to other relevant risk factors, including high-crime or deprived neighborhoods, peer pressure and genetic traits.

Lead researcher Melissa Sturge-Apple, an assistant professor of psychology

concluded:

- "Families can be a support and resource for children as they enter school, or they can be a source of stress, distraction, and maladaptive behavior. This study shows that cold and controlling family environments are linked to a growing cascade of difficulties for children in their first three years of school, from aggressive and disruptive behavior to depression and alienation. The study also finds that children from families marked by high levels of conflict and intrusive parenting increasingly struggle with anxiety and social withdrawal as they navigate their early school years."