
PARENTS STRESSED-OUT, SMACKING & YELLING CAN LEAD TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN KIDS

Parent stress and harsh discipline can increase risk of mental health problems in young children, researchers at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute have found.

Harsh discipline, such as smacking and yelling, can contribute to a child being disobedient and aggressive. Parent stress can also lead to early signs of child anxiety and depression.

MCRI researchers are the first to quantify ongoing risks of mothers' stress and parenting practices from infancy to preschool. They included 733 participants from all socioeconomic levels in the study.

The findings, published this week in the prestigious *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, will help develop family support programs to reduce behavioural and mental health problems in children.

"Effective and cost-efficient population approaches to preventing mental health problems early in childhood are urgently needed. These programs need to support parents in reducing personal stress as well as negative parenting practices," said MCRI researcher and child psychologist Dr Jordana Bayer.

Mental health problems comprise a public health issue affecting one in seven Australian children, including preschool-aged children, and can continue through childhood and adolescence to adulthood.

Consequences of mental health problems include friendship and learning difficulties, school dropout, alcohol and drug abuse, poor vocational outcomes, family violence and at times suicide. The costs to society are high, including clinic and special education services, sick-leave and unemployment, as well as the criminal justice system.

"Health professionals working with children should ask about the parent's wellbeing and stress levels. We know stressed parents find parenting hard work but there are ways to help reduce this stress and help parents to manage their child's behaviour in more calm and consistent ways," said MCRI researcher and paediatrician Dr Harriet Hiscock.

If anyone is concerned that their family has these problems, they can speak to a local doctor for a referral, or telephone the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497.

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