

Inside Out:

Harsh parenting interacts with children's acting out vs. holding in "bad" feelings

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Children are extremely impressionable, moldable, and constantly developing. Many things can make a child act out and cause trouble, and many things can make a child sad or anxious. And, sometimes these problems are just a phase, but sometimes they rise to the level of a psychological disorder. A very important question to discuss is: what exactly is causing these problems in children in the first place?

Researchers at TEND Lab at San Diego State University and University of Michigan have found bidirectional connections between harsh parenting and children's behavior.

There are two types of problem behavior in children: problems are actively displayed (externalizing symptoms) or problems are not as apparent (internalizing symptoms). Children with problems that you can see tend to show symptoms such as aggression and troublesome behavior. And then there are children with depression and anxiety, internal feelings that are hard to see.

Previous studies have considered these two symptoms to be independent of each other, but TEND Lab has concluded that the two are more likely to mix and interact with one another. It is not common for people to think of an aggressive person to be fundamentally sad, but the research done here shows how this plays out in kids and shows that parents can play a large role in the emergence of these symptoms.

This study conducted on a large population of predominantly low-income children born all across the United States show that there is a pattern between externalizing symptoms, harsh parenting, and internalizing symptoms.

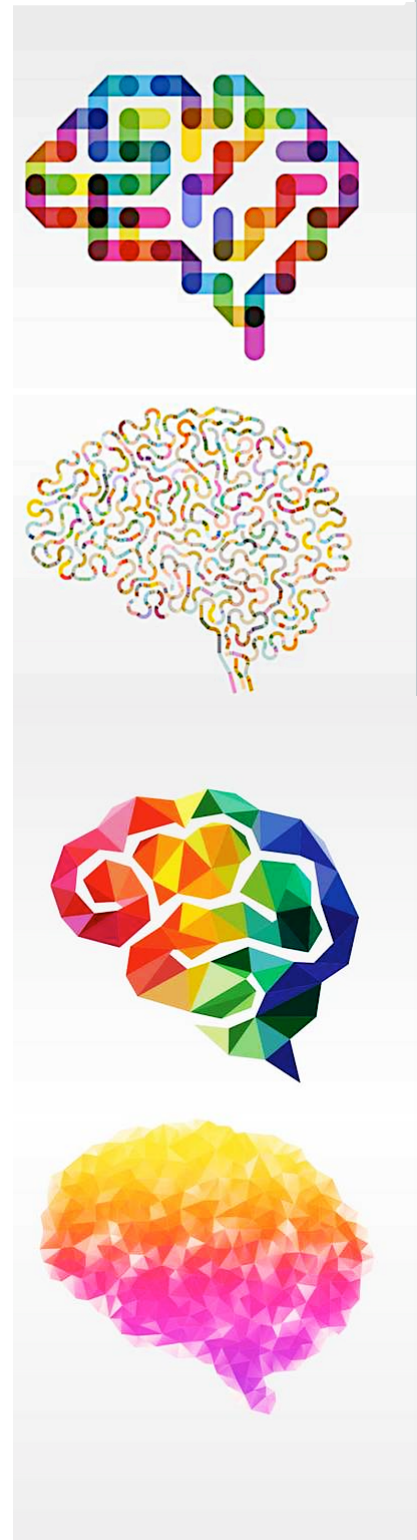
The researchers identified two main ways that these problems can interact with one another and potentially spiral out into bigger problems.

First, when toddlers show externalizing symptoms (such as being aggressive), that leads to parents using harsher discipline techniques (yelling, hitting) at age 5, which then in turn leads the child to have more internalizing symptoms (such as depression and/or anxiety) at age 9.

Second, toddlers who act out actually also show signs of depression and anxiety, which can eventually lead to more acting out.

What Does This Mean?

This means that children's moods, behaviors, and attitudes are greatly affected by their parents. Understanding the emergence of psychological problems must first be done by looking at the way people develop over time, and not just a certain period of their life. Children are the product of continuous interactions between themselves and the environment, constantly being sculpted by and sculpting those who surround them.



Wiggins, J.L., Mitchell, C., Hyde, L.W., Monk, C.S. (2015). Identifying early pathways of risk and resilience: The co-development of internalizing and externalizing symptoms and the role of harsh parenting. *Development and Psychopathology*.