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Childhood memories of father have lasting impact on men's ability to handle stress

First study to examine parenting quality on stressful experiences, emotions in later life

SAN DIEGO – Sons who have fond childhood memories of their fathers are more likely to be emotionally stable in the face of day-to-day stresses, according to psychologists who studied hundreds of adults of all ages.

Psychology professor Melanie Mallers, PhD, of California State University-Fullerton presented the findings Thursday at the 118 th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association.

"Most studies on parenting focus on the relationship with the mother. But, as our study shows, fathers do play a unique and important role in the mental health of their children much later in life," Mallers said during a symposium focusing on social relationships and well-being.

For this study, 912 adult men and women completed short daily telephone interviews about that day's experiences over an eight-day period. The interviews focused on the participants' psychological and emotional distress (i.e., whether they were depressed, nervous, sad, etc.) and if they had experienced any stressful events that day. These events were described as arguments, disagreements, work-related and family-related tensions and discrimination.

The participants, who were between the ages of 25 and 74, also reported on the quality of their childhood relationships with their mother and father. For example, they answered questions such as, "How would you rate your relationship with your mother during the years when you were growing up?" and "How much time and attention did your mother give you when you needed it?" The same questions were asked about fathers. The research controlled for age, childhood and current family income, neuroticism and whether or not their parents were still alive.

Participants were more likely to say their childhood relationship with their mother was better than with their father, with more men reporting a better mother-child relationship than women, according to Mallers. People who reported they had a good mother-child relationship reported 3 percent less psychological distress compared to those who reported a poor relationship.

"I don't think these results are surprising, given that past research has shown mothers are often the primary caregiver and often the primary source of comfort," said Mallers. "It got interesting when we examined the participants' relationship with their fathers and their daily emotional reaction to stress."

Men who reported having a good relationship with their father during childhood were more likely to be less emotional when reacting to stressful events in their current daily lives than those who had a poor relationship, according to her findings. This was not found to be as common for the women in the study.

Also, the quality of mother and father relationships was significantly associated with how many stressful events the participants confronted on a daily basis. In other words, if they had a poor childhood relationship with both parents, they reported more stressful incidents over the eight-day study when compared to those who had a good relationship with their parents.

Mallers theorized why healthy or unhealthy relationships may have an effect on how people handle stress as adults. "Perhaps having attentive and caring parents equips children with the experiences and skills necessary to more successfully navigate their relationships with other people throughout childhood and into adulthood," she said.

She added it was difficult to come up with a concrete theory as to why men's relationship with their father had such an influence on their emotional reaction to stress, especially since this study included adults of all ages who were raised during very different eras in the United States.

"The role of fathers has changed dramatically from the time the oldest participants were children," added Mallers. "We do know that fathers have a unique style of interacting with their children, especially their sons. We need more research to help us uncover further influences of both mothers and fathers on the enduring emotional experiences of their children."

Symposium: "Social Relationships and Well-Being – A Life Span"

Session 1235: 1:00 – 2:50 PM, Thursday, Aug. 12, San Diego Convention Center, Upper Level, Room 25B

Presentation: "Fathers and Sons: Importance of Paternal Affection for Adult Well-Being," Melanie H. Mallers, PhD.

For more information or an interview, contact **Melanie Mallers** at 657-278-3890 or cell 714-875-8652 or by e-mail (<mailto:hmhmallers@fullerton.edu>).

The American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists. APA's membership includes more than 152,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare.

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Contact

Audrey Hamilton
 APA Public Affairs
 (202) 336-5706 until Aug. 11
 (619) 525-6271– Aug. 12-15
 E-mail