



MT. HOPE FAMILY CENTER

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Background Information:

Child maltreatment (CM) can increase the likelihood that people will experience a range of mental health problems.

However, child maltreatment is a broad term used to define many experiences, and it is important to consider a) the developmental stage in which it occurred or b) whether it occurred briefly and then stopped (i.e., episodic) or chronically throughout a child's life.

What is the Project SOLAR study?

SOLAR is a follow-up study of the kids who participated in the summer research camp between 2004-2008. SOLAR Research Assistants caught up with participants when they were between the ages of 18-22. The goal of this paper was to understand how maltreatment chronicity (i.e., the number of developmental periods in which maltreatment occurred) and timing (i.e., age of onset and recency of exposure) related to different forms of mental health symptoms in childhood and emerging adulthood.

Here's a quick summary of what we found:

- Individuals with CM histories were more likely to show externalizing symptoms (e.g., acting out, antisocial behaviors, aggression) in childhood and symptoms of externalizing disorders in adulthood (e.g., substance dependence and antisociality).
- Focusing on more precise information, such as the developmental timing and chronicity of exposure, illuminated critical and nuanced differences. CM experiences that spanned several developmental periods, including both early (age 0-5) and later childhood (age 6-10) stages, resulted in greater internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing symptoms in childhood, which then led to greater internalizing and externalizing symptoms in emerging adulthood.
- CM exposures that were limited to later childhood (ages 6-10) predicted greater childhood externalizing symptoms and antisocial and substance dependence symptoms in emerging adulthood. CM exposures limited to early childhood (ages 0-5) did not result in greater mental health symptoms in childhood or adulthood.

Why does this research matter??

- Children who experience chronic maltreatment that extends across early and later childhood may be particularly vulnerable to many forms of mental health problems later in life because the repeated stress can stifle their valiant attempts to cope or rebound.
- When maltreatment is isolated to early developmental stages, children may be provided with respite and the opportunity to draw on their individual/familial/community strengths to recover from the effects of adversity. Likewise, when children only experience maltreatment later in childhood, they may be more likely to have a healthy developmental foundation to draw upon for protection.
- Children are capable of incredible resilience following adversity, but we need to provide them with opportunity to do so by preventing ongoing abuse with policy and intervention.
- When researching or treating the mental health consequences of maltreatment, it is not enough to simply know whether someone has a history of abuse or neglect. Knowing when, and for how long, an individual experienced maltreatment will improve our ability to tailor interventions to an individual's unique needs.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? READ:

Child maltreatment and the development of psychopathology: The role of developmental timing and chronicity

by Justin Russotti, Jennifer Warmingham, Erinn Duprey, Elizabeth Handley, Jody Manly, Fred Rogosch, & Dante Cicchetti