

# Developmental cascades from child maltreatment to negative friend and romantic interactions in emerging adulthood

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?


The purpose of this study was to explore various avenues that may explain the influence of child maltreatment on emerging adult relationships. Previous research suggests that child maltreatment may be linked to poorer quality relationships later in life, and this research aimed to see whether this was the case using a longitudinal design. Specifically, this work looked at antisocial tendencies (e.g., stealing, damaging property) and relational aggression (e.g., aggressive behavior with peers) in a group of children who had and hadn't experienced maltreatment, and then surveyed these children approximately a decade later to see if and how maltreatment was related to negative relationship quality in early adulthood. Based on prior research and theory, the authors hypothesized that the more maltreatment experiences a child had, the more aggressive they would be as an emerging adult in their intimate relationships.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

In this study, the researchers used a longitudinal sample (i.e., participants tracked at different points in time) of children (ages 10-12, mean age=11.3; 71.6% African American) from a summer research camp. Children at this camp were all from low-income families, but only half had experienced maltreatment. The other half served as a comparison group. These children were measured using self-reports, peer assessments, and counsellor evaluations regarding their antisocial behaviour and various forms of aggression. They were then invited back to again participate in the study when they were emerging adults (18-20 years of age; mean age=20.2), and were asked a range of questions through a self-report measure and structured clinical interviews. For this study, the authors looked specifically at three pieces of data from the emerging adult surveys: negative friend and romantic partner interactions (conflict, criticism and antagonism) and reports of past year experience and/or use of domestic violence.

## **WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:**

- This work indicates that early intervention programs for children experiencing maltreatment are critical for reducing the chance of emerging adult relationship problems
- Suggests that children who have experienced maltreatment and who are using antisocial or relationally aggressive behaviors are likely priority populations for secondary prevention.
- Offers scientific support to theory that connects child maltreatment with future relationship problems, and suggests promising areas for future research.



## *Developmental cascades from child maltreatment to negative friend and romantic interactions in emerging adulthood*

---

### **WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?**

First, the researchers found that as children's maltreatment experiences increased, their antisocial behaviours and relational aggression in childhood increased as well. The researchers then found that early antisocial behaviour and relational aggression both explained the effects of childhood maltreatment on future relationship quality, but that there were different outcomes depending on the form of childhood aggression. Specifically, children who reported maltreatment and more antisocial behaviors were more likely to report more negative emerging adult romantic relationships (i.e., relationships with more conflict, criticism and antagonism). Children who reported maltreatment and more relational aggression were more likely to report more negative emerging adult friend relationships. These pathways were the same for males and females.

Finally, the authors looked at connections between maltreatment and negative emerging adult relationship quality and adult domestic violence. They found that emerging adults who reported any domestic violence involvement (use and/or experience) were more likely to have experienced more forms of maltreatment in childhood and to report more negative emerging adult romantic relationships than emerging adults who did not use/experience any domestic violence.

### **HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

This research can be used by future scholars looking to build on the existing scientific data regarding childhood maltreatment, and its links to emerging adult relationship difficulties. As well, this work can be used by family-based prevention programs as a rationale for targeting early maltreatment and behavioral issues in children. Moreover, this work is useful for service providers who are looking for information on possible prevention targets for antisocial and aggressive students. Lastly, this work is critical for parents and educators to know. Specifically, this work provides verification of a strong link between maltreatment during childhood and relationship problems later in life. As such, taking extra effort to support these children during early stages of development is important in order to reduce the chance of poor relationships and domestic violence emerging later on in their life.

### **ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS:**

Elizabeth D. Handley, PhD, University of Rochester, NY, USA

Justin Russotti, PhD, University of Rochester, NY, USA

Fred, A. Rogosch, PhD, University of Rochester, NY, USA

Dante Cicchetti, PhD, University of Rochester, NY, USA & University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

### **KEYWORDS**

Antisocial behaviour, child maltreatment, coercion, friendships, relational aggression, romantic relationships.

### **FULL REFERENCE**

Handley, E. D., Russotti, J., Rogosch, F. A., Cicchetti, D. (2019). Developmental cascades from child maltreatment to negative friend and romantic interactions in emerging adulthood. *Development and Psychopathology*, 31, 1649-1659.