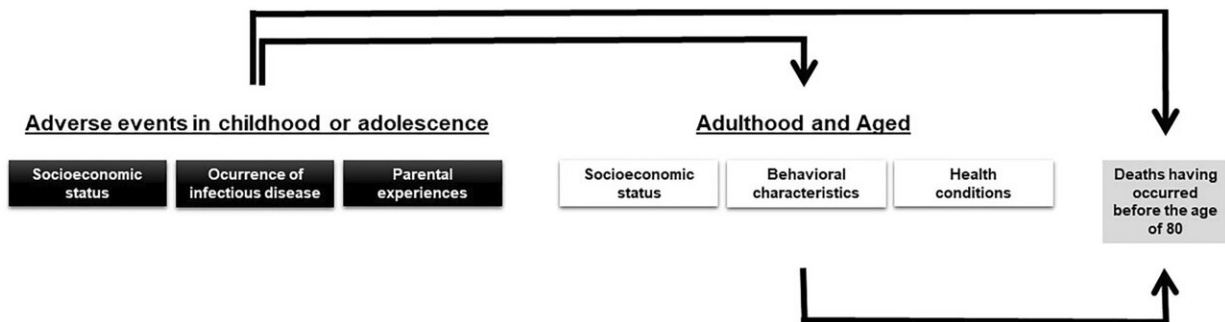


Children of overprotective parents tend to live less, study suggests

February 6 2023, by Maria Fernanda Ziegler



Hierarchical theoretical model of effects of variables of interest on mortality.
 Credit: *Scientific Reports* (2022). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-022-23443-y

Men who had an overprotective father and little autonomy during childhood may run a 12% higher risk of dying before their eightieth birthday. In the case of women who had an overprotective father, the risk of dying before the age of 80 can increase by 22%. On the other hand, for women who were well cared for by their mother during childhood, the risk may decrease by 14%.

Interestingly, the research also showed that men who lived with only one parent in childhood had a 179% higher risk of dying before turning 80.

These are some of the findings of a study involving analysis of data for 941 participants in the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) who

died between 2007 and 2018 (445 women and 496 men).

An article on the study is published in the journal *Scientific Reports*. The authors are researchers at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) in Brazil and University College London (UCL) in the United Kingdom.

The participants included in the study sample were born in the 1950s and 1960s. "The results of our analysis refer to people who would now be elderly, and they wouldn't necessarily be the same for later generations," said Tiago Silva Alexandre, last author of the article. Alexandre is a professor of gerontology at UFSCar.

The researchers analyzed the participants' answers to questionnaires about many aspects of their lives, including [family structure](#), housing, the head of household's occupation, the presence of infectious diseases, and relationships with parents in childhood and adolescence, especially care and protection. They looked for correlations among these items to estimate the impact of parental relationships on longevity.

"The most interesting thing about our study is that we were able to show in numbers what has been discussed about parenting for many years. Caring and loving relationships with your father and mother during childhood have repercussions for the rest of your life. In particular, our findings show how they affect longevity," Alexandre said. "Public policy should support better conditions during childhood in order for people to enjoy old age."

Research on the psychological after-effects of child-parent relationships has shown that authoritarianism, permissiveness and negligence can be negative for children's development.

"The middle way is best, avoiding both intrusiveness, which stops children from being autonomous, as well negligence or emotional

distance. What we call care in the article is a matter of not neglecting but being present and taking care without overprotecting," said Aline Fernanda de Souza Canelada, first author of the article. She participated in the study for her master's research.

The study is the first to investigate how the absence of a parent or deficient parental relationships can reduce longevity. "Children need [parental care](#) and support, but not intrusion, which deprives the child of autonomy. Research in psychology shows that this kind of relationship is also weak, because the child is afraid of the parent, and leads to various problems, including unhealthy habits, with some studies showing an increased risk of alcohol and drug abuse, as well as mental health difficulties such as stress, which correlates closely with reduced longevity," Canelada said.

Similarly, the lower risk for women who were well cared for by their mother may be associated with a low level of stress during childhood (and hence adulthood). According to the results of the study, only maternal care mattered; paternal relationships were not considered crucial.

"We know from studies in the area of psychology that all these phenomena relating to parental relationships affect behavior. There's a theory that links this to stress. Neglected children may experience higher levels of stress later in life owing to the reverberations of this early neglect, and the probability of disease increases," Alexandre said.

The researchers analyzed premature mortality independently from ill health and age. "It would be incorrect to attribute the higher risk of early death to a past event without considering the presence of diseases and problems in old age. We therefore controlled for these variables, and analyzed the correlations involving factors present in a subject's childhood with premature mortality regardless of their health in old age,"

he said.

Post-war generation

Although the study focused on what happened to the "baby boom" generation born after the Second World War, the researchers believe it is not possible to be certain that the experience of more recent generations is very different.

"We know parents now overprotect their children differently, and this may also have an impact. It's a different kind of [relationship](#), but it also has its fragilities," Alexandre said, citing the example of children who live with only one parent. The study pointed to a 179% higher risk of dying before age 80 for the [male participants](#) who lived with only one parent when they were children.

"In this case, cultural and social factors may have had a more significant effect than they do now. Having separated parents was seen differently in the past and could be particularly difficult for male children. We can't know how this would work out now, given the society we have, but it was very heavy for males born in the 1950s and 1960s, the study shows," he said.

The study also pointed to a difference between genders in terms of the impact on longevity of parental absence or negative parental relationships. Overprotective parents affected the lifespans of female children more than male children, and the presence of a mother had a positive effect only on those of female [children](#). According to Canelada, women are apparently more likely to internalize negative emotions and more frequently suffer from mental disorders, while men are more subject to alcohol and drug abuse. "In any event, both factors correlate closely with longevity," she said.

More information: Aline Fernanda de Souza et al, Gender differences in the association between adverse events in childhood or adolescence and the risk of premature mortality, *Scientific Reports* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-022-23443-y](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-23443-y)

Provided by FAPESP

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