

# Link found between witnessing parental domestic violence during childhood and attempted suicide

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A new study by the University of Toronto (U of T), found the lifetime prevalence of suicide attempts among adults who had been exposed to chronic parental domestic violence during childhood was 17.3% compared to 2.3% among those without this childhood adversity.

"We had expected that the association between chronic parental [domestic violence](#) and later [suicide attempts](#) would be explained by childhood sexual or physical abuse, or by mental illness and substance abuse. However, even when we took these factors into account, those exposed to chronic parental domestic violence still had more than twice the odds of having attempted suicide" reported lead author Professor Esme Fuller-Thomson, Sandra Rotman Endowed Chair at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Institute for Life Course and Aging.

The study examined a nationally representative sample of 22,559 community-dwelling Canadians, using data from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey-Mental Health. Parental domestic violence was defined as "chronic" if it had occurred more than 10 times before the respondent was age 16.

"When domestic violence is chronic in a home, there is a risk of long term negative outcomes for the children, even when the children themselves are not abused. These chaotic home environments cast a long

shadow. Social workers and health professionals must continue to work vigilantly to prevent domestic violence and to support survivors of this abuse and their children" said Fuller-Thomson.

"Those who had been maltreated during their childhood were also more likely to have attempted suicide, with 16.9% of those sexually abused and 12.4% of those physically abuse having made at least one suicide attempt" reported Reshma Dhrodia, a recent MSW graduate of the University of Toronto.

"A history of major depressive disorder quadrupled the odds of suicide attempts. A history of anxiety disorders, substance abuse and/or chronic pain approximately doubled the odds of suicide attempts" said Stephanie Baird, a co-author and social work doctoral student at the University of Toronto. "These four factors accounted for only 10% of the association between suicide attempts and parental domestic violence, but almost half of the association between suicide attempts and childhood sexual abuse or physical abuse. This suggests professionals working with survivors of [childhood](#) adversities should consider a wide range of interventions addressing mental illness, substance abuse and chronic pain."

The paper was published online this week in the journal *Child: Care, Health and Development*.

**More information:** "The association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and suicide attempts in a population-based study" by E. Fuller-Thomson, S. L. Baird, R. Dhrodia and S. Brennenstuhl ( [DOI: 10.1111/cch.12351](https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12351) ). *Child: Care, Health and Development*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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