

The impacts of children's emotions and behavior on parenting

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While both inherited traits and environmental influences affect parent-child interactions, not much is known about how child behavior impacts parenting and, in turn, later child outcomes.

Elizabeth Shewark, a former Penn State doctoral student in [developmental psychology](#) and current postdoctoral research fellow at Michigan State University, is examining the evocative gene-environment correlation, the process through which children's inherited characteristics, such as their [negative emotions](#), influence parenting environments.

The work, which appears in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, was part of Shewark's dissertation and is the first of three planned papers.

"I was interested in examining how inherited [child](#) traits are associated with child emotion, and how children's genetically influenced emotions during early childhood are linked to parenting and later child behavioral outcomes," Shewark said. "Much of the research on child behavior and parenting

focuses on families rearing their biological children. However, parents and children share both genes and environments, so it is difficult to tease apart genetic and environmental influences."

The research team utilized the Early Growth and Development Study, a longitudinal adoption study, which includes 561 adopted children from two cohorts and their linked adoptive parents and birth parents, following them from infancy to early adolescence. The adoption design helps to clarify genetic and environmental influences because adoptive parents are genetically unrelated to the child but provide the rearing environment, while birth parents are genetically related to the child but do not provide the rearing environment.

"I was very fortunate to have access to longitudinal, genetically informed data. By using these data, we were able to assess the role of certain environmental influences, such as parenting, and inherited traits in child adjustment," said Shewark, who was advised at Penn State by Social Science Research Institute cofunded faculty Jenae Neiderhiser and Kristin Buss.

The research team assessed inherited traits via biological parent temperament, child anger and sadness at four and a half years, followed by child behavior problems and social competence at seven years. In addition to child emotions and behavior, the research team examined adoptive parent hostility and warmth.

The researchers found that child anger at four and a half years evoked hostility from their adoptive parents at six years of age, which was then linked to an increase in child behavioral problems at seven years of age.

"We also found different associations with anger and sadness. For example, we found that child anger was associated with more hostile parenting, and this was partially because of the inherited traits

of the child. We were surprised to find that child anger and sadness were not associated with warm parenting in our study," Shewark explained. "Warm parenting has been shown to be important for child adjustment. Evocative gene-environment correlation findings with warm parenting have been mixed, suggesting that evocative effects may be present for specific positive parenting behaviors rather than overall parental warmth."

According to Neiderhiser, this study shows how important it is to consider the role of the child in their own development.

"In this study we found that children influence the way they are parented, while parents still help to shape child [behavior](#). In other words, both parents and children influence child adjustment," said Neiderhiser.

This study is the first in a series of three dissertation papers. "The next paper focuses on how children's behaviors and inherited traits might impact teacher-child relationships and, in turn, be linked to child adjustment," Shewark said. "My dissertation work really inspired me to continue examining how children's inherited traits and their environment impact children's developmental outcomes. Currently I'm extending this work to include neighborhoods."

More information: Elizabeth A. Shewark et al, The role of child negative emotionality in parenting and child adjustment: Gene–environment interplay, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13420](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13420)

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