

Sensitive parenting in childhood creates 13-fold cost savings

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A recent study found that sensitive, responsive parenting—specifically in early childhood—has a direct correlation with not only positive mental and physical health, but also financial benefits for families and society.

Average costs for children raised by the most responsive parents are well under \$3,000, compared to more than \$30,000 for children raised by the least responsive parents.

The paper, titled "A Good Investment: Longer-term cost savings of sensitive parenting in childhood" was published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. Tom O'Connor, Ph.D., professor in the department of Psychiatry and director of the Wynne Center for Family Research at the University of Rochester Medical Center, was among the contributing authors for the article, which is the first study to focus on the analysis of the direct [financial benefits](#) for families that come from sensitive parenting.

Sensitive (or responsive) parenting is a style often described as heightened parental sensitivity and responsiveness to child distress, an affectionate and engaged style, and the use of firm rather than harsh discipline. Previous studies have associated sensitive parenting with improved cognitive outcomes for [children](#).

"We have known for some time that the quality of early parenting is associated with behavioral [health](#) and [physical health](#) in children, as well as success in school and in the peer group," said O'Connor.

The study enrolled approximately 170 children and adolescents from two different sample groups, one at moderate-risk—recruited through anti-social behavior screening in primary school—and one at high-risk of poor outcomes who had previously been referred to child mental health clinics for anti-social behavior. The goal was to assess parental awareness of the child's needs, sensitivity to their signals, promotion of child play, and adoption of the child's point of view.

The study assessed and evaluated parental behavior across three different tasks, lasting approximately 20 minutes: Child-directed free play, parent-

directed building task, and a tidy-up task. These interactions were then evaluated using the Coding of Attachment-Related Parenting (CARP) developed by O'Connor, an assessment of sensitive responding, positive and negative affect and mutuality in parent-child dyads of school-aged children through direct observation.

"Assessing parenting quality through observation is a better, less biased approach rather than asking parents about their own parenting behaviors on a questionnaire," said O'Connor. "We used the ratings of parenting behavior from individuals who were trained in how to rate behavior but had no other knowledge about the family. This kind of 'independent' prediction also distinguishes the study and makes the findings especially novel."

Results of the study showed the following:

- Males who were at an older age, were eligible for free school meals, and who lacked sensitive parenting, all predicted greater total costs.
- The difference in social, educational and healthcare costs between adolescents exposed to more sensitive care versus least sensitive care was estimated to be \$27,595.53 (£20,000).
- Children whose parents' early sensitive parenting skills were in the best quartile cost a mean of \$2,248.66 (£1,629.73), per individual.
- Children whose parents had sensitive parenting skills in the lowest quartile had an individual mean cost of \$30,656.62 (£22,218.54).

Costs were calculated in UK sterling because the study took place in the UK.

These total costs were spread across personal family spending and

education, health, social and justice services. The cost difference remained significant (approximately 13-fold) after controlling for several potential confounders, including demographic variables; exposure to child abuse; and level of antisocial behavior in both childhood and adolescence, IQ, and attachment security.

"In this paper, we show for the first time that early parenting quality predicted financial [costs](#) associated with health, education and welfare approximately a decade later. That is, poor early parenting is 'costly' not only in terms of child health and well-being, but also in terms of actual financial burden," said O'Connor.

The direct return on investment when using sensitive parenting is that family savings are likely to increase as the child gets older. The use of sensitive parenting also predicts positive health, [behavior](#) and occupational outcomes in adulthood, while poor early parenting is "costly," not only in terms of child health and well-being, but also in terms of actual financial burden borne by the family.

More information: Christian J. Bachmann et al, A good investment: longer-term cost savings of sensitive parenting in childhood, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13461](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13461)

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