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Keep calm and don't carry on when parenting teens

20/02/2019



Researchers look at how mothers and fathers control themselves (and their rising anger) in difficult interactions with their teenagers.

The field of adolescent psychology is increasingly focused on parents, with researchers asking how mothers and fathers control themselves (and their rising anger) in difficult interactions with their children. As anyone who has raised a teenager knows, parental goals often don't exactly align with those of the child. Sometimes, not even close.

"Discipline issues usually peak during toddlerhood and then again during adolescence, because both periods are really marked by exploration and figuring out who you are, and by becoming more independent," says Melissa Sturge-Apple, a professor of psychology and dean of graduate studies in Arts, Sciences & Engineering at the University of Rochester.

Yet the developmental changes during puberty and the transition to adolescence mean that parents necessarily need to adjust their parenting behaviors, she adds. Part of that adjustment is parents' ability to think on their feet and navigate conflicts with flexibility as their teens strive for more autonomy and greater input in the decision-making processes. Sturge-Apple is the lead author of a recent study about mothers' and fathers' capacity for self-regulation as well as hostile parenting during their child's early adolescence. The study is published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*.

The research was sparked by an obvious deficit: more than 99 percent of parent regulation

studies have focused exclusively on mothers. In this study, Sturge-Apple and her colleagues -- Patrick Davies, professor of psychology at Rochester; Zhi Li, a postdoctoral fellow at the University's Mt. Hope Family Center; Meredith Martin '14 (PhD), now an assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska; and Rochester psychology graduate student Hannah Jones -- looked at how mothers and fathers regulated their stress in response to conflict with their adolescent children. They then examined how the stress response affected their discipline of the child. The researchers measured parents' physiological regulation using RMSSD, a widely used measure to assess heart rate variability. The laboratory-based assessments were spaced roughly one year apart.

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The researchers found that those parents -- both mothers and fathers -- who were less capable of dampening down their anger, as measured by RMSSD, were more likely to resort, over time, to the use of harsh, punitive discipline and hostile conflict behavior vis-à-vis their teenager.

The scientists also measured parents' set-shifting capacity -- that is, the parents' ability to be flexible and to consider alternative factors, such as their child's age and development.

"Set shifting is important because it allows parents to alter flexibly and deliberately their approaches to handling the changeable behaviors of their children in ways that help them to resolve their disagreements," says Davies.

On average, fathers were not as good as mothers at set shifting and were less able to control their physiological anger response. As a result, they were more likely to think that their teen was intentionally difficult, or "just trying to push buttons," which in turn guided their decisions about discipline.

However, the researchers found that those fathers who were better at set shifting than others were also better able to counteract difficulties in physiological regulation. These episodes of physiological dysregulation, the team discovered, predicted over time an increase in parents' angry responses -- and that essentially, set shifting offsets this angry response tendency.

"As we learn more, these findings may have important implications for building and refining parenting programs," says Davies. "For example, there are exercises that help increase physiological regulation in ways that may ultimately reduce hostile parenting behaviors for mothers and fathers."

There's an irony in past research studies' almost exclusive focus on mothers.

"Dads are typically the enforcer in the family and this role may be difficult to override," says Sturge-Apple. "Thus, the ability to be flexible in responses may help dads, more than moms, adjust to the changes of adolescence."

The research, which included 193 fathers, mothers, and their young teenagers (aged 12 to 14), was conducted at the University's Mt. Hope Family Center, which recently garnered an unrelated multi-million-dollar grant to establish a national center to study child abuse and prevention.

The research for this study was funded by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and

Human Development.

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