

The Long Reach of Childhood Experiences

MIDUS

Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

MIDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES: A NATIONAL STUDY OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
FUNDED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING



The MIDUS national study included multiple questions about memories of childhood experiences. We are finding that people's answers to these questions are linked with their mental and physical health in adulthood. Here we provide an overview of some of these findings.

SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCES REPORTED from CHILDHOOD:

- » 27% moved three or more times
- » 16% had a parent who drank too often
- » 11% were in financially worse off families
- » 10% had an unemployed parent
- » 7% had a parent who died
- » 8% had divorced parents
- » 0.8% had a parent with a drug problem

WHAT DID MIDUS ADULTS RECALL ABOUT THEIR CHILDHOODS?



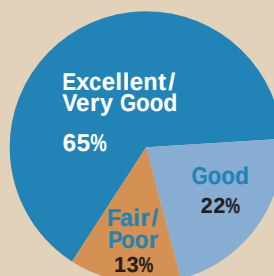
Most Recalled Good Parental Relations

- » Overall quality of mother-child relations were rated better than father-child relations.



- » Men reported better mother-child relations than women.
- » Men and women reported similar quality father-child relations.

Relations with Mothers



Relations with Fathers



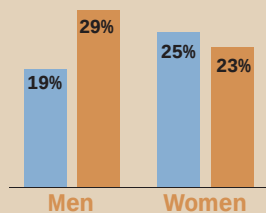
Some Recalled Poor Parental Relations

- » 22% reported emotional abuse from mothers (insults, swearing, threatening violence).

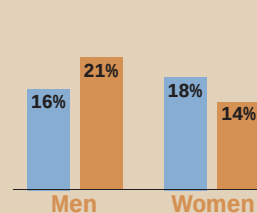


- » 26% reported emotional abuse from fathers.
- » About 20% reported severe physical abuse from one or both parents.

Emotional Abuse



Physical Abuse



from Mothers from Fathers

Early Relations with Parents

Better Relations ➞ Less Daily Stress

- Adults who recalled better mother-child relations had *lower levels of daily distress* (less depression, restlessness, hopelessness).
- Those with better relations with either parent had *fewer stressful events* (arguments, work or home demands).
- Men who had better early relations with their fathers *were calmer when faced with stressful situations*.

[Mallers, et al., 2010]



Happy Childhoods are linked with better adult well-being



Parenting Styles ➞ Adjustment

- Adults who recalled authoritative parents (who provided emotional support & consistent discipline) reported less depression and greater adult well-being (feeling good about themselves, having more purpose in life).
- Adults who reported authoritarian parents (with strong discipline, but little support) or uninvolved parents (with neither support nor discipline) reported more depression and lower well-being.
- Authoritative parenting was particularly important for men's well-being.

[Rothrauff, et al., 2009]

More Parental Support ➞ Less Depression & Better Health

- Receiving affection and attention from parents was associated with less adult depression. *Mother's support was especially crucial for women, while father's support was critical for men.*
- Affection from mothers was associated with fewer chronic health conditions for women (such as asthma or arthritis). To a lesser extent, this was also true for men and their fathers.
- Adults from advantaged families (whose parents had more education) reported more childhood parental support.

[Shaw, et al., 2003]



Growing Up in One Place ➞ Greater Happiness

- Those who moved fewer times during childhood reported more life satisfaction and happiness as adults.
- *Moving often was especially hard on introverts (who are less outgoing) because it led to difficulty forming friendships during adulthood.*
- Introverts who moved a lot during childhood had greater risk of mortality over a 10 year period compared to extraverts (who were more outgoing & sociable).

[Oishi, et al., 2010]



Can Affect Adult Adjustment

*It is easier to
build strong children
than to repair broken men.*
Frederick Douglas



Unhappy Childhoods are linked with problems even in old age

Child Abuse ⇒ Poor Physical Health

Recalling both physical and emotional childhood abuse was associated with experiencing:

- *more chronic illnesses as an adult (such as heart disease or diabetes)*
- *more rapidly declining health over a 10 year period*
- *health problems that made common tasks difficult, such as carrying groceries or walking up stairs.*

[Greenfield, et al., 2009]



Child Abuse ⇒ Poor Mental Health

Lower Psychological Well-Being:

Adults were more likely to have poor well-being (not liking themselves, having poor relationships) if as children they reported:

- Mothers who were frequently emotionally abusive
- Fathers who were emotionally abusive, often physically abusive, or both.

Depression: Adults were more likely to be depressed if their childhood included:

- Emotional abuse from mothers
- Frequent physical abuse from fathers
- Parents who were both physically and emotionally abusive.

[Greenfield, et al., 2010]

Child Abuse ⇒ Obesity

- Adults who reported both emotional and physical abuse as children, with at least one occurring frequently, *ate larger amounts of their favorite foods when stressed, and were more likely to be obese.*

[Greenfield, et al., 2009]



Physical Abuse ⇒ Stomach Disorders & Migraine

- Experiencing any physical abuse as a child increased the odds of having chronic stomach problems as an adult.
- *Frequent physical abuse was also associated with increased likelihood of ulcers & migraines.*

[Goodwin, 2003]



Less Maternal Support ⇒ Alcoholism

- *Even a small lack of emotional support from mothers in childhood was associated with a 30% increased risk of alcohol abuse in later life.*
- A serious lack of emotional support increased the risk to 66%.

[Shaw, et al., 2006]



What Shields Us?

*Even unhappy childhoods
can be left behind*



Belonging to a Community

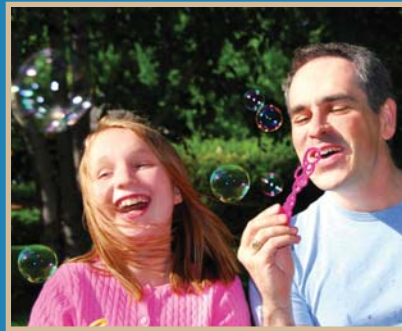
- Those who reported frequent emotional and physical violence as children had better mental health as adults if they felt close to others in their community.
- Communities provide social support, models of good relationships, and the opportunity to make positive contributions to the lives of others.

[Greenfield, et al., 2010]

Believing You Can Overcome Obstacles

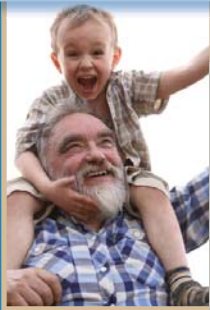
- Reporters of childhood physical abuse who had a strong sense of personal control (believing they could overcome obstacles & be happy) had better physical health and less depression as adults than those who reported such abuse but felt more helpless.

[Pitzer, et al., 2010]



*It is never
too late
to have
a happy
childhood.*

∞ Tom
Robbins



Self-Esteem & Positive Family Relations

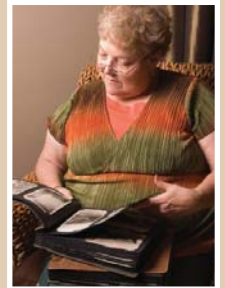
Those who reported a lack of emotional support from parents in childhood were less depressed as adults if they:

- had high self-esteem and a sense of personal control
- received more support from adult relatives who were caring and understanding
- had fewer negative interactions (that were critical or demanding) with adult relatives.

[Shaw, et al., 2004]



Remembering Childhood



Answering MIDUS questions about childhood meant recalling conditions that occurred as much as 50 years ago. Because of this long passage of time, some question whether such recollections are reliable data for research.

This problem has also been studied, and there is mounting evidence that bias in recalling childhood experiences may not be as great as some have thought.

However we remember our childhoods, MIDUS findings show that those memories are linked to our adult experiences.

For More Information

Citations for sources indicated in brackets, plus additional articles on childhood experiences, can be found on the MIDUS website at:
MIDUS.wisc.edu

MIDUS—Midlife in the United States

Institute on Aging, University of Wisconsin-Madison
2245 MSC, 1300 University Ave.
Madison, WI 53706-1532
Phone: (608) 262-2056 • Fax: (608) 263-6211
Email: aging@ssc.wisc.edu

MIDUS
Midlife in the United States

<http://MIDUS.wisc.edu>

Thanks to
all MIDUS
participants
who shared
their childhood
memories
and made
this research
possible.

