

IN DEPTH

# Why Harsh Parenting Can Put Kids On The Wrong Track

BY  
Sandi SchwartzPOSTED ON  
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Figuring out the most effective way to discipline our children can be quite a challenge. If you are too loose and try to be their best friend, they will walk all over you, but if you are too hard on your kids, it can backfire and impact their education and future success.

A new study Published in [Child Development](#) on February 8, 2017, shows that overly aggressive, harsh parenting can make kids more susceptible to peer pressure, and ultimately more likely to drop out of school. A large body of research over the years has made it clear that using [corporal punishment](#) can harm our children, including causing mental health issues like anxiety and depression, reducing cognitive ability, and tainting the parent-child relationship.

This new study, according to the head researcher, is the first to use children's life experiences with their parents as a framework to explore how parenting can affect children's educational success with regard to relationships with peers, sexual behavior, and delinquency.

What is considered harsh parenting? For the purposes of this research, harsh parenting was defined as yelling, hitting, and engaging in intimidating behaviors like verbal or physical threats as a means of punishment by a parent to their child.

### **The Study**

Researchers evaluated 1,482 students living in the Washington, D.C. area attending seventh grade – most were 12 years old. They tracked them for a total of nine years until three years after their expected graduation from college at around 21 years old. The participants were from a broad range of racial, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds.

The students were asked to regularly report on their parents' use of physical and verbal aggression, as well as their own interactions with peers, delinquency, and sexual behavior. For example, they indicated behavior such as relying on peers instead of doing homework. When participants were 21, they shared their highest level of education obtained.

The researchers wanted to explore whether children growing up in environments with this type of inflexible parenting would be less likely to complete high school or go to college. Evolutionary theories have suggested that harsh environments can make survival uncertain. Therefore, individuals growing up in these environments tend to seek out immediate rewards rather than focus on long-term goals or outcomes.

Many of the messages that children hear about the importance of education address long-term goals, like getting into a good college or finding a better-paying job. This outlook does not appeal to children raised by aggressive, rigid parents.

### **What researchers found**

The data showed a chain of events that caused kids with parents who regularly yelled at them or threatened them with aggressive punishments to be more likely to drop out of high school or college than their peers. This occurred regardless of the grades they were getting or their socioeconomic status.

This is how it works: Students who were parented harshly in seventh grade were more likely in ninth grade to say that their peer group was more important than other responsibilities, including following their parents' rules, doing chores, and getting their homework done.

This, in turn, led them to engage in more risky behaviors in eleventh grade, including early sexual behavior in females and greater delinquency, like stealing and getting in fights, for males. These behaviors, in turn, led to low educational achievement three years after high school. It was clear that those who were parented harshly were more likely to drop out of high school or college.

Why was this the case? These kids did not have an issue with school itself, but were more likely to put their friends first and get involved in negative behaviors to make them feel good in the short term instead of being focused on the long term.

When humans are placed in a situation where there is a lot of harshness, unpredictability, and/or danger, we are more likely to look for immediate short-term rewards to feel better about ourselves and our situation. It is very hard to focus on the future when you are just trying to get through each day. These kids had no interest in focusing on the big picture like getting good grades. Instead, they avoided homework and broke their parents' rules to hang out with a friend.

In other words, kids whose needs, like affection, are not met by their parents will look for it elsewhere. However, this may lead to unhealthy behaviors to fit in and get attention from peers. The children in the study explained that they were more influenced by the opinion of their friends than their parents who treated them in a nasty way. The problem with this is, then, these kids are more susceptible to peer pressure, which can lead them down a bad path like teen pregnancy, drug use, or crime.

### **The takeaway for parents**

This research reiterates how important it is for parents to avoid verbal and physical aggression towards their children. This type of parenting will only impede your child’s success for the rest of their lives.

It is okay to be strict to a point, but there is a clear line in which tough parenting becomes unpleasant for the child. This can lead the child to seek out a connection to others in a way that will probably only make you angrier.

If you are frustrated with your kids not listening to you, try some alternative disciplinary approaches like mindfulness, positive reinforcement, taking away privileges, and encouraging them to express their emotions through creativity like writing and art. Finally, do not hesitate to seek out professional help by visiting a doctor or therapist.

It is also important not to put too much pressure on your kids, especially as they enter the teen years. Be careful about overwhelming them with questions and concerns regarding their future. Instead, try engaging them in enjoyable short-term goals that are realistically attainable so they can reap the immediate rewards.

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