

21 October 2008**Coverage**
United Kingdom**Theme**
Society

Childhood stress link to emotional disorders

Children who experience three or more stressful life events, such as family bereavement, divorce or serious illness, are significantly more likely to develop emotional and behavioural disorders according to new research published today by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The three-year study tracked the emotional wellbeing of a sample of children and young people between 2004 and 2007 and reviewed the factors likely to be associated with the onset or persistence of disorders.

It found that three per cent of children who did not have an emotional or behavioural disorder in 2004 had developed one by 2007, with family, household and social characteristics strongly linked to the onset of one or more disorder.

Among these factors, exposure to stressful life events was strongly linked with the development of emotional disorders. Researchers asked parents if their children had experienced events such as divorce or family bereavement, serious illness in the family or loss of a close friend.

They found that where children had experienced three or more such events by the time they were first surveyed in 2004, they were three times more likely to develop emotional disorders than those who had not.

Physical illness was also strongly linked to the onset of emotional disorders. Children who had experienced a serious or chronic illness in 2004 were twice as likely to develop emotional disorders, the researchers found.

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Other factors associated with the onset of emotional disorders included family structure - with those living in single-parent households more likely to develop disorders - the number of children in the family and the mental health of the mother.

The study also reviewed factors associated with the persistence of existing disorders. Thirty per cent of children diagnosed as having emotional disorders in 2004 still had them by 2007, with family, household and social characteristics again strongly linked to persistence.

In particular, the persistence of emotional disorders was strongly linked to type of household tenure. Children who lived in rented accommodation were more likely to have a persisting emotional disorder than those who did not.

Factors affecting the persistence of behavioural disorders, such as awkward and troublesome behaviour and aggressive and antisocial behaviours, were also reviewed. Around 43 per cent of children and young people who had been assessed with behavioural disorder in 2004 also had the disorder in 2007, with persistence linked with household tenure, parents' educational attainment and occupation, and number of children in the family.

The study also considered factors which may protect against the onset, or help children recover from, emotional and behavioural disorders. In both cases 'social capital' factors such networks of family and friends, participation in clubs and groups and perceived safety in the neighbourhood were strongly linked with emotional wellbeing.

The school setting, and its influence on children's emotional wellbeing, was also considered in depth. The study suggests that the persistence and onset of a mental disorder can be linked to factors such as school exclusions, absenteeism and achievement at school, as well as the existence of special educational needs.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. The full report, *Three years on: A survey of the emotional development and wellbeing of children and young people*, is available free on the ONS website at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/article.asp?id=2063>
2. Causal relationships should not be assumed for any of the results presented here or in the report. Although the study reports strong links between certain individual characteristics and the incidence or persistence of disorders, these should not be taken to mean that the characteristics cause the disorders described.
3. For the purposes of the study, emotional disorders were defined as emotional problems including anxiety, depression and obsessions. Behavioural disorders were defined as involving awkward and troublesome behaviour and aggressive and antisocial behaviours.
4. For the purposes of the study, persistence of emotional or behavioural disorders is defined as those children who still had a mental disorder three years on (the persistent group) and the remainder who were assessed as having no disorder in the three year follow up study (the recovered group). Onset of emotional or behavioural disorders is defined as those children who developed a mental disorder in the three years since the first survey (the onset groups) and the remainder, the vast majority, who were assessed as not having a childhood mental disorder on both occasions.
5. **National Statistics** are produced to high professional standards as set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from political interference. © Crown Copyright 2008.