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Guilt trip: Controlling parents hurt kids' future relationships

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Blame your parents if you're a 20-something who can't maintain a healthy relationship, researchers say.

People whose parents exerted psychological control on them during their teenage years may have a harder time developing close relationships in their early adulthood, according to a new study.

For the longitudinal study, published in the journal *Child Development*, scientists at the University of Virginia compared parents' psychological control to playing mind games with their teenagers to get them to behave in a certain way. Examples of these manipulative tactics included withdrawing love, using guilt and fostering anxiety.

“Some other examples include things like, ‘My mother and father are always trying to change me and always reminding me of things they’ve done for me. But they’re also less friendly with me if I don’t see things their way, or they’ll stop talking to me if I don’t do what they want,’” study author Barbara Oudekerk, a statistician at the Bureau of Justice Statistics, told FoxNews.com.

“You’re not just taking away the ability to think independently, [as parents] you’re telling [teenagers]: ‘Our relationship is going to be hurt if you disagree with me,’” added Oudekerk, who was a psychology research

associate at the University of Virginia when these findings were recorded.

While behavioral control— such as setting curfews for teenagers or monitoring who they hang out with— has shown positive outcomes for adulthood behavior, what the researchers called “intrusive” psychological behavior was linked with less independence, and less productive arguments, during early adulthood.

“We’ve seen in past research that the longer you’re in a relationship, the more you need autonomy and the closeness,” Oudekerk said. “Those often correlate and go together.”

The ongoing study began in 1998, and researchers recruited the 184 participants, who were 13 years old at the onset of the study, through a public middle school. Each year, during the participants’ teenage years, ending at age 18, researchers surveyed them about their psychological health, their parents’ behavior, their self-beliefs and attitudes, as well as their relationships with their friends. During the participants’ adult years, from ages 18 to 21, researchers added more questions about the quality of the participants’ romantic relationships and their physical health.

In a second part of the study, researchers observed the participants’ real-life behaviors when they were 13, 18 and 21 years old by placing them in a video-monitored room and simulated an event where they were forced to disagree. At age 13, for example, researchers told participants to hypothetically consider that 12 of the people in the group were stranded on Mars, and only seven people could return to Earth. Participants came up with their lists prior to rejoining with the group and having to pick a final roster.

“They’re set up to disagree, but they’re supposed to be coming to some sort of conclusion together,” Oudekerk said.

At ages 18 and 21, participants brought in their closest peer for this experiment, and researchers observed how they argued.

“What we found is that the more psychological control they experienced, the less they were able to express autonomy with these opinions,” Oudekerk said. “It doesn’t mean they always agreed or disagreed with someone.” Rather, she said, the signs of a healthy relationship meant that “they could state their opinion confidently and give reasons for why they thought the way they did, and in a way that was warm and collaborative with the other person.”

Based on previous research, the scientists had hypothesized that the study participants’ quality of friendships in their teenage years would impact their romantic relationships during early adulthood, but they didn’t expect the reverse to be true.

“It’s often theorized that friendships pave the road for romantic relationships, but romantic relationship experiences also shape how well individuals react with their friends,” study author Lauren Molloy, an education research associate at the University of Virginia, told FoxNews.com.

Surprising to the researchers, skills like being able to assert one’s independence while maintaining a warm relationship developed through adolescence and early adulthood and across all different kinds of relationships.

“I think what we’re seeing from the study is that parents can really build the foundation for how teens can resist negative peer pressures and assert independence,” Molloy said. “At the same time, if parents are trying to control their teens, but doing so in these negative manipulative ways, they’re unfortunately probably doing more harm than good. They’re undermining the development of teens’ healthy relationship skills.”

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