

# Schoolyard conflicts may be linked to serious health problems later in life, research shows

By **Amy Joyce**

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Kids argue at school, push each other after a foul on the court, ghost a former BFF.

And parents often roll their eyes when these conflicts happen.

But in fact, the way kids handle conflict with peers may have major long-term health repercussions. New research from the University of Virginia shows that ramifications from schoolyard conflicts may be tied to premature aging and other issues — even tumors, arthritis and cancer — later in life.

“It’s easy for parents to think these adolescent relationships are trivial, that they don’t mean much, that it’s all passing,” said Joseph Allen, U-Va.’s Hugh Kelly Professor of Psychology, who led the study. “This is to say they aren’t trivial.”

The study, called “[The Body Remembers](#)” and published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*, found that a protein in the bloodstream that has been associated with development of cancerous tumors, osteoporosis, arthritis and other problems associated with aging, was present at high levels in the bloodstreams of 28-year-olds who experienced chronic social conflict beginning as early as age 13, but not among those who handled conflict well.

What does this mean?

“Teens are not irrational to care so much about their peers,” Allen said. “Humans are pack animals and adolescents know that ... getting along with peers will make or break you.”

Allen and his team of researchers started following 127 middle-schoolers in 1998. They asked the students and their peers how well they managed conflict and then observed the students interacting with their close friends. The researchers followed up with them throughout the years. When the students were 28, the researchers took blood samples. (They had not collected them when the subjects were younger.) Those who had trouble handling conflict when they were younger had higher levels of the protein (called interleukin-6) in their blood.

“There’s enough research in adulthood that links stress to health. That made us wonder about adolescence,” Allen said. “Our interest was really, ‘Is it strong enough that it affects our biology, that it has a lasting impact?’ “

One way the team measured conflict stress and management was to ask 13-year-olds in the study to respond to hypothetical situations. For instance, if they were playing basketball and another team made fun of them in a mean way, what would they do? The researchers rated them based on how they said they would defuse the conflict. Punch somebody? Not a good rating. Pretend they didn’t hear the comment? A so-so rating. But choosing to shut down the conversation with a comment, without causing more conflict, would receive the highest rating.

At 16, the teens were asked whether they were able to get over conflicts easily, whether they managed disagreement with friends well. And at 21, they were studied interacting with a romantic partner. They were asked to both determine where they disagreed. Then researchers looked at how much hostility was directed at them by the partner.

Those who didn’t handle conflict well at younger ages and those who had difficult romantic relationships later were found to have a higher protein marker.

“We have reason to think the immune system and stress system are particularly malleable and open to influence in teen years,” Allen said. “These things that have them stressed in adolescence have long-term impact.”

To help children with these stressors, parents should model good conflict management and teach their children that they can still remain friendly with people they disagree with. “Let them disagree with you, but rein in their hostile behavior,” Allen said.

The message Allen hopes parents can takeaway from the research? “When teens are worried about [peer conflict], that’s exactly what they should be doing. We need to take this seriously. It’s not something to be ignored.”

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