

Handley, E. D., Russotti, J., Warmingham, J. M., Rogosch, F. A., Todd Manly, J., & Cicchetti, D. (2021). Patterns of Child Maltreatment and the Development of Conflictual Emerging Adult Romantic Relationships: An Examination of Mechanisms and Gender Moderation. *Child Maltreatment*, 26(4), 387–397.

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What we know

Child maltreatment refers to neglect as well as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of a child that is perpetrated by a parent or caregiver. Adults who have experienced child maltreatment are more likely to struggle with romantic relationships and intimate partner violence (IPV). Identifying the developmental pathways underlying child maltreatment risk for engagement in aggressive romantic relationships and clarifying for whom this vulnerability is greatest is important for prevention.

What this study adds

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of child maltreatment on the development of unhealthy romantic relationships in emerging adulthood (EA), as well as to determine whether childhood physical aggression and disinhibition influenced this risk. When compared to children who had not been maltreated, children who had endured chronic maltreatment with multiple subtypes as well as children who had only experienced neglect as a subtype of maltreatment were particularly vulnerable to the emergence of high levels of early physical aggression in EA. Importantly, findings show that even when compared to individuals who also experienced maltreatment but whose maltreatment was restricted to a single subtype of maltreatment other than neglect (e.g., physical abuse or sexual abuse only), these individuals are at particularly high risk for developing aggressive behavior.

What this means for practice or policy

The study highlights the need for effective and accessible early prevention and intervention strategies to stop the intergenerational transmission of family violence and dysfunction. Evidence-based models of intervention that focus on promoting secure attachment and adaptive interpersonal functioning may be particularly important for children experiencing chronic multiple abuse or neglect. Early intervention can prevent hostility and disinhibition and the accumulation of negative consequences that lead to problematic romantic relationships.

How we know this is a good study

The participants were 398 emerging adults ages 18–23 years who participated in two waves. The first wave was completed during childhood; equal numbers of low-income children with and without documented histories of childhood maltreatment were recruited. The Maltreatment Classification System was used to determine the subtype and chronicity of child maltreatment. Both peer and camp counselor reports were used to assess the level of hostility among the kids. At Wave 2, participants self-reported information about their romantic relationships from the previous year. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to find the routes connecting patterns of childhood maltreatment experiences to conflicts in EA romantic relationships. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to establish the latent factor structure for childhood aggression and EA romantic relationship conflict.