

Boy toddlers need extra help dealing with negative emotions

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The way you react to your two-year-old's temper tantrums or clinginess may lead to anxiety, withdrawal and behavior problems down the road, and the effect is more pronounced if the child is a boy who often displays such negative emotions as anger and social fearfulness, reports a new University of Illinois study.

"Young children, especially boys, may need their parents' help working through angry or fearful emotions. If you punish toddlers for their [anger](#) and frustration or act as if their fears are silly or shameful, they may internalize those [negative emotions](#), and that may lead to behavior problems as they get older," said Nancy McElwain, a U of I associate professor of human development.

McElwain and lead author Jennifer Engle examined data gleaned from observations of 107 children who were part of a larger study of children's social and emotional development and parent-child relationships.

When the children were 33 months old, mothers and fathers were asked how often their child had displayed anger or social fearfulness in the last month. The parents were also asked how they would respond to the child's negative emotions in several hypothetical situations.

"We investigated two types of parental reactions to children's negative emotions. One type of reaction was to minimize their child's emotions; for example, a parent might say, 'Stop behaving like a baby.' Another

type of reaction was punishing the child for these emotions. A parent might send the child to his room for crying or being upset, or take away a toy or a privilege," Engle said.

When children reached 39 months, parents answered questionnaires about their child's current [behavior problems](#).

Moms and dads who were apt to punish their kids for their fears and frustrations were more likely to have children who were anxious and withdrawn at the time of the second assessment. And the effect was especially pronounced for boys who had been identified as having a high incidence of negative emotions at 33 months, she said.

"When parents punish their [toddlers](#) for becoming angry or scared, children learn to hide their emotions instead of showing them. These children may become increasingly anxious when they have these feelings because they know they'll face negative consequences," Engle said.

The researchers are intrigued with the finding that little boys were especially affected when they're not supported during times of fear or [frustration](#).

"In our culture, boys are discouraged from expressing their emotions. If you add parental punishment to these cultural expectations, the outcome for boys who often experience negative emotions may be especially detrimental," Engle said.

According to the researchers, parents play an important role in helping children learn how to regulate and express their emotions. This study, which gathered responses from both mothers and fathers, adds to a growing body of work that suggests that both parents are important in this process, McElwain said.

"When children are upset, it's better if you can talk with them and help them work through their emotions rather than sending them to their room to work through their feelings on their own. Young [children](#), especially little boys who are prone to feeling negative emotions intensely, need your comfort and support when their emotions threaten to overwhelm them," Engle said.

More information: This study will be published in the May issue of *Social Development* and is available pre-publication online at [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10...010.00583.x/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/socdev.12583)

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