

# Economic recession takes toll on family relationships, researcher says

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A majority of Americans rate their current financial situation as poor or fair, and nearly half of Americans say they have encountered financial problems in the past year, according to the Pew Research Center. A University of Missouri researcher studied how parents' financial problems and resulting mental distress affect their relationships with their children. He found that parents who experience financial problems and depression are less likely to feel connected to their children, and their children are less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering or helping others.

"The study serves as a reminder that children's behaviors are affected by issues beyond their immediate surroundings," said Gustavo Carlo, Millsap Professor of Diversity in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "Families' economic situations are affected by broader factors in our society, and those financial problems can lead to depression that hurts parent-child relationships."

Previous research has indicated that parent-child connectedness is an important indicator of prosocial behavior in [children](#). Prosocial behaviors lead to moral development, better outcomes in relationships and enhanced performance at work and school.

Unlike previous research that has focused on high-risk and low-income families, Carlo and his colleagues studied middle- to upper-middle-class families. Parents and children answered questions about economic stress, depression and connectedness between parents and children. A year

later, the children reported how often they engaged in prosocial behaviors toward strangers, family members and friends.

"Even middle-class families are having financial difficulties, and it's affecting their ability to be effective parents," Carlo said. "When parents are depressed, it affects their relationships with their kids."

Carlo suggests, when possible, that depressed parents seek treatment from a mental health professional. Parents also can seek help from their spouses, families, friends, churches and other community agencies. He recommends [parents](#) balance efforts to help themselves with spending quality time with their children.

"Raising kids is tough as it is," Carlo said. "When you have the added layers of financial difficulty and depression, it makes raising children even more challenging."

The study, "A Test of the Economic Strain Model on Adolescents' Prosocial Behaviors," was published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* earlier this year. Carlo collaborated with researchers Laura Padilla-Walker and Randal Day at Brigham Young University. The Department of Human Development and Family Studies is part of the College of Human Environmental Sciences.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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