

Parental monitoring and consistency in adolescence can reduce young Black men's likelihood of criminal behavior

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New research examined the effect of different parenting styles during adolescence on crime among African American men. The study found that parenting styles characterized by little behavioral control placed youth at significant risk for adult crime, even though some of those styles included high levels of nurturance. In contrast, youth whose parents monitored them, were consistent in their parenting, and had high levels of behavioral control were at lowest risk for adult crime.

The study, by researchers at the University of Georgia and Mississippi State University, is forthcoming in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

"We examined parenting styles rather than parenting behaviors, which allowed us to look at various combinations of parenting behaviors—things like warmth, monitoring, and consistent discipline—as they naturally co-occur rather than treating them as though each occurs in a vacuum," explains Leslie Gordon Simons, professor of sociology at the University of Georgia, who led the study.

In their analysis, the authors went beyond how parenting is typically studied to include styles that use corporal punishment. This approach allowed them to examine the impact of corporal punishment in the context in which it takes place (e.g., the presence or absence of nurturance or behavioral control).

The researchers examined longitudinal data on 318 African American men to identify the effects of eight parenting styles in early adolescence on [crime](#) in young adulthood. The participants, from a sample initially recruited from Iowa and Georgia, were part of the Family and Community Health Study and were generally representative of African American families in poor, working-class, and middle-class neighborhoods.

The researchers assessed parents' [style](#) when youth were 10 and 12 years old and identified eight styles of parenting: authoritative, no-nonsense, authoritarian, vigilant, permissive, lax, neglectful, or abusive. The researchers also measured criminal [behavior](#) when youth were 22 and 25 years old. In addition, the study considered how childhood traits (e.g., conduct problems, poor self-control), as well as background and social-environmental variables (e.g., parents' education, community violence), were likely to affect the quality of parenting and youth's antisocial behavior. Researchers also observed the effects of parenting styles mediated by factors that can cause criminal behavior, including antisocial behavior, [negative emotions](#), affiliations with deviant peers, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

The study found that parenting styles that involved high levels of behavioral control (e.g., authoritative, authoritarian, no-nonsense) reduced the risk of crime in adulthood. In contrast, the study found that parenting styles with low levels of behavioral control (e.g., abusive, permissive, and lax) significantly increased the risk for crime in adulthood. The harmful consequences of abusive parenting (harsh corporal punishment in the absence of nurturance or behavioral control) are not surprising, but the negative consequences of permissive parenting (which were characterized by indulgent levels of warmth without behavioral control) and lax parenting (which involves high levels of nurturance combined with corporal punishment) suggest that parenting styles lacking monitoring and consistent discipline are more likely to put

youth at risk for later criminal behavior, even when parents are warm and nurturing.

"This suggests that parenting with a lot of responsiveness is not, on its own, sufficient to reduce risk for criminal involvement," notes Tara Sutton, assistant professor of sociology at Mississippi State University, who coauthored the study.

The study also found that the effects of corporal punishment on crime depend on the parenting context in which the punishment occurs: It can enhance monitoring and consistency of some parenting styles (e.g., no-nonsense), but in the absence of these behaviors (e.g., lax, abusive parenting styles), it is a risk factor for later participation in crime. The authors note that although some parenting styles that include [corporal punishment](#) were effective at deterring adult crime, past research has found that there are costs associated with this discipline strategy, such as adolescent depression, anxiety, and poor school performance.

The authors identified as a limitation that their study considered only one outcome—crime; studying other outcomes might yield different results. For example, experiencing warm, nurturing parenting as an adolescent may be associated with later success at being a loving romantic partner or father.

Also, while the study considered the impact of parenting during adolescence on criminal behavior during early adulthood, it did not consider the extent to which parenting might moderate the effects of various criminogenic factors (e.g., neighborhood crime), so the authors suggest the study be viewed as a conservative estimate of the effect of parenting on adult crime.

"Most studies on predictors of crime have focused on peer affiliations, neighborhood disadvantage, racial discrimination, and transitions to

adulthood, with less attention to the effect of parenting during adolescence on adult criminal behavior," notes Dr. Simons. "Our study suggests that [parents](#), who are the primary socialization agents during their children's formative years, continue to have considerable influence over their adolescents' later [criminal behavior](#)."

More information: *Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12285](#)

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