cortisol levels were associated with persistence and early onset of aggression, especially when measures of cortisol concentrations were pooled. Boys with low cortisol concentrations at both years two and four had three times the number of aggressive symptoms. They also were named as being most aggressive by peers three times as often as boys who had higher cortisol concentrations during either of the sampling times.

"A restricted [low] range of cortisol variability may be more indicative of persistent aggression than a low concentration of cortisol at any single point in time," say the researchers.


Parental monitoring reduces early sexual behavior

Research findings suggest that interventions with parents and other guardians to increase monitoring and communication about sexual risks may be promising health-promotion strategies for adolescents in high-risk settings.

Researchers designed a study to determine whether parental strategies to monitor children’s social behavior and to communicate with them about sexual risks helped reduce the initiation of risky sexual behavior. They surveyed a stratified cross-section of 355 African-American children ages nine to 17 who lived in urban public housing. Talking computers were used to increase confidentiality of the survey and to compare interviews across the wide age range of participants.

Children who reported high levels of parental monitoring were less likely to report initiating sex in preadolescence (age 10 or younger) and reported lower rates of sexual initiation as they aged.

Children who reported receiving
both greater monitoring and communication from parents concerning sexual risks were found to be less likely to have engaged in anal sex. Children who reported receiving more communication from parents also were more likely to report the use of condoms, both for initial and subsequent sexual encounters.

The type of guardian the child had did not matter; mothers and other family members were found to be equally effective in reducing sexual risks with improved communication and monitoring.


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Youths in the institution, found that all had exhibited the triad behaviors. In addition to violent behavior, their histories included family chaos, serious drug use and sexual crimes ranging from exhibitionism and molestation of small girls to forcible rape. A follow-up study of these extremely violent boys determined that several of them had been victims of sexual abuse, and that they in turn perpetuated sadistic attacks on younger or weaker victims.5

Later researchers found that fire setting, enuresis and animal abuse behaviors by themselves did not necessarily predict future violence, unless the animal abuse was particularly aggressive and included some or all of the following characteristics:

• The child was directly involved with animal cruelty and not just a witness.
• He was impulsive and exhibited no remorse for his actions.
• He engaged in a variety of cruel acts and victimized different species.
• He mistreated valued animals, such as dogs (rather than rodents, for example).

Even in chaotic homes, animals often rely more on their pets for love and loyalty than do other children. Yet in violent homes, animals seldom survive past age two. They are either killed, die from neglect or run away to escape the abuse. One side effect of this constant turnover, even where overt violence does not take place, is that the young child suffers from repeated cycles of attachment and loss.5

Several studies have linked animal abuse to interpersonal violence. In North Carolina, for example, researchers compared police reports with animal cruelty reports and found almost equal numbers of each at the same addresses. The calls to the police were for disturbances (32 percent), domestic violence (31 percent) and assault (16 percent). In a follow-up study, the majority of police calls to the animal abusing homes were for sexual assault (62 percent) and mental health (35 percent).7

Animal abuse and family violence

In New Jersey, a study found that a stunning 88 percent of the families who had physically abused their children also had records for animal abuse. The study found extensive “triangling” within the families, whereby pets were mistreated as a way of hurting another family member. While two-thirds of the animal abusers in the study were children’s fathers, perhaps the most disturbing finding was that the other third were the children themselves.8

In a Wisconsin study of battered women, four out of five victims reported that their partners had been violent toward their pets or livestock as well as to them. In most cases, the animal cruelty was carried out in the presence of the battered woman and her children. The women also reported that their partners frequently threatened to give away their pets as a way to control them.9

There is evidence that animal abuse in a family may be related to the lethality of domestic violence incidents. A few years ago, Nashville, Tenn., had one of the highest domestic homicide rates in the country. In response, the police department instituted a screening process for all domestic violence calls, wherein officers began collecting three pieces of information: Was the batterer brandishing or threatening his partner with a weapon? Had he threatened suicide? Had there been any abuse of family pets? Abusers with any of these characteristics were sent to special programs. Within one year of instituting this policy, Nashville’s domestic homicide fatalities fell 80 percent, even though domestic calls went up 50 percent during the same period.10