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## Genetic Influences

University of Dayton

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# NEWS

Wednesday May 18, 2016

## Genetic Influences

A new study by Jackson Goodnight, a University of Dayton associate professor in psychology, reveals the link between fussiness as an infant and the risk for behavior problems later in life may be driven by genetics instead of environmental factors.



Goodnight's research is published online in the journal *Behavior Genetics*.

"We've known for a long time that even in the first or second year of life, having a fussy irritable temperament is a predictor for future behavior problems," he said. "But why there is an association remains unclear."

Goodnight's research builds on scientific understanding by examining data on siblings. He used surveys of mothers and their children from an ongoing national study started in 1979, and compared children from the same family who turned out differently. Fussiness in infants was reflected in mothers' ratings of their children as being hard to sooth and prone to frustration or anger. Antisocial behaviors, such as disobedience, fighting and stealing, were tracked through childhood and adolescence.

"The way we conducted this study with sibling comparisons is a little bit closer to an experiment. Even though we're not assigning children to different temperaments, we know siblings share a lot of things in common that helps us rule out alternative explanations," he said. "A lot of the factors that predict future behavior problems are the things like genetic risks, family environment and those things that siblings share in common."

Goodnight explains his study finds that the effects of the early environment on a child's temperament do not explain why fussy infants are more likely to exhibit behavior problems later in life. Rather, it appears that genetic influences on temperament are primarily responsible for the link to later behavior problems.

“It's saying this is more complicated than we thought,” Goodnight said. “It tells us that temperament may work in ways we don't yet understand. We've ruled out some possibilities, but now we have others to explore.”

“This is one piece in a bigger puzzle of trying to understand how temperament relates to behavior problems. The more we know about it, the better equipped we are to help parents and kids prevent the development of behavior problems, which have huge societal and financial costs — and, if left unchecked, create school difficulties, family instability in adulthood, problems with employment, reduced education, higher dropout, drug use and criminality. Identifying very early risk factors is important for trying to find ways to prevent those outcomes before they ever happen.”

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