



Toughened toddlers seek rewards

Children who grow up in a harsh environment and act assertively at aged two tend to do better than average when solving reward-based problems, but do worse on abstract ones.

Stressful childhood environments are known to alter children's cognitive development. Jennifer Suor and colleagues at the University of Rochester, New York looked at 201 mother-child pairs to better understand how a child's problem-solving style is linked to their life history.

Household income and the mother's interest and engagement with their child were measured at 2 years old, along with the child's assertive or 'hawk' traits. These traits include heightened levels of aggressiveness, boldness, activity and approach.

The children's abstract and reward-based problem solving were then tested at 4 years old. Only the children from difficult early environments, who also had hawk traits, showed reduced abstract and improved reward-based problem solving.

The authors suggest stressed children should be viewed as being more reward-orientated, instead of just cognitively impaired, and that assessments and interventions could be modified to reflect this.

Suor, J. H., Sturge-Apple, M. L., Davies, P. T. and Cicchetti, D. (2017), A life history approach to delineating how harsh environments and hawk temperament traits differentially shape children's problem-solving skills. J Child Psychol Psychiatr, 58: 902–909. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12718

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