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The (decreasingly) rough-and-tumble world of childhood

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UdeMNouvelles

IN **5** SECONDS
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An UdeM study of over 2,000 Quebec boys and girls confirms that things get better after the 'terrible twos' – but not always.

Young children generally get more physically aggressive between the ages of 1½ and 3½, but that usually diminishes as they get older and go to school, a new Université de Montréal study shows.

Some, however, don't stop acting out. In fact, they remain more aggressive right into their teens, alienating them from society and getting involved in violent crime, drinking and drugs.

Those most at risk of acting out through their entire childhood are children, especially boys, whose parents are poorly educated and prone to depression, and who grow up in low-income homes with several siblings.

Led by UdeM public-health professor Sylvana Côté, the study is based on over a dozen years of behavioural assessments of 2,223 Quebec boys and girls born in the late 1990s, from 18 months of age to 13 years.

The assessments were made by the children's mothers, by their teachers and by the kids themselves. The data came from a longitudinal study on child development initiated in the late 1990s by UdeM pediatrics and psychology professor Richard E. Tremblay.

The results were

[published](#)

just after Christmas in JAMA Network Open, an online journal of the American Medical Association. The researchers hope their work will help at-risk kids in early childhood, before their problems worsen.

"Family characteristics at 5 months after the child's birth could be used to target preschool interventions aimed at preventing the development of boys' and girls' chronic physical aggression problems," the study says, adding that "interventions during pregnancy and early childhood may help to prevent high physical aggression in children in high-risk families."

Founding director of UdeM's

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specializing in research on maladjusted children, recipient in 2017 of the Stockholm Prize in Criminology, and in December named an officer of the Order of Canada, Tremblay is also an emeritus professor at University College Dublin.

Each child in the new study was scored on whether he or she sometimes, often or never got into fights, physically attacked others, and hit, bit, or kicked other children.

Girls tended to score substantially better than boys – that is, they tended to be much less physically aggressive – but not always. One girl in four was rated more physically aggressive from early childhood to early adolescence, usually when coming from the same high-risk backgrounds as the boys. These girls tended to have poorer marks at school, starting smoking earlier, got pregnant earlier and suffered violence themselves at the hands of their boyfriends.

About this study

"Risk factors associated with boys' and girls' developmental trajectories of physical aggression from early childhood through early adolescence," by Ali Teymoori et al, was

[published](#)

Dec. 28 in JAMA Network Open.

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