

Tulane researcher to use grant to study children exposed to violence

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Sarah Gray, an assistant professor of psychology at Tulane University, will study the development of children who have been exposed to violence or other traumatic events. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Sarah Gray, an assistant professor of psychology at Tulane University, has been awarded a NARSAD Young Investigator Grant through the [Brain and Behavior Research Foundation](#).

A NARSAD grant is one of the highest distinctions in the field of mental health research. Less than 200 researchers receive the prestigious grant each year, and

Gray will use the money – up to \$70,000 over two years – to study the development of children who have been exposed to violence or other traumatic events.

Gray's project is titled *Parasympathetic and Behavioral Synchrony and Child Emotion Dysregulation Following Trauma*. She and her team, which includes collaborators in the Tulane Department of Psychiatry and the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, will investigate how potentially traumatic events affect the development of young children.

“Studies show that children under 5 years old are exposed to these events at rates that are actually higher than older children,” said Gray. “And we know that many children who are exposed to these events show lingering effects for long period of time.”

She said they may be less able to regulate their behavior and emotions, their bodies respond to stress differently and they are at greater risk for mental illness as they grow up. On the other hand, some children who witness potentially traumatic events exhibit none of these signs.

“We are specifically focused on children's ability to regulate their emotions and behavior,” Gray said. “The study includes both children and their parents because we know that parents are critical to the development of self-regulation skills in children, and that parents are critical to how children respond in the wake of traumatic exposures.”

She said the study is unique in that it will look at biology, behavior and the environment – and how they work together. “We're hoping that when we understand the mechanisms that underlie regulation difficulties among children exposed to trauma, we can better support parents to support children.”

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