

Study shows parents display more conservative attitudes

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Nicholas Kerry, a PhD student in the School of Science and Engineering, co-authored a study that appears in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

(Photograph by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Parents give lots of advice: “Look both ways before you cross the street,” for example, or “Don’t run with scissors.”

These old sayings are more than just clichés. They can be considered examples of a certain type of individual perspective, one that portrays our

world as a dangerous place — a perspective parents might use to instill caution in their children.

Some evidence supports the idea that socially and morally conservative values may arise from perceived threats or danger, said Nicholas Kerry, a PhD student in the Tulane University School of Science and Engineering.

Research shows that “people get more conservative with age,” Kerry said, “but there weren’t a lot of satisfactory explanations to this. It occurred to me that parenting might have a role in this. It would make sense for it to change our motivations and attitudes.”

In their study of 1,500 participants, Kerry and co-author [Damian R. Murray, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology](#), conducted four online surveys that examined attitudes to political topics that typically divide liberals and conservatives, such as reproductive rights and the military.

Kerry and Murray hypothesized that parents display more conservative attitudes because they are more often risk-averse, likely in the interest of protecting their children. They not only found differences between parents and non-parents, but also that people who felt more warmly toward children reported more socially conservative attitudes. What’s more, these differences appeared to explain some of the increases in conservatism with age. However, parenting or not parenting is unlikely to cause wild swings in political or social opinions.

“We’re likely talking about fairly small and gradual changes over the course of several years,” Kerry added.

Kerry’s research is ongoing, and further work has found that the relationship between parenting and social conservatism may be explained by reduced interest in short-term mating and increases in belief in a “dangerous world”. [“Conservative parenting: Investigating the relationships between parenthood, moral judgment, and social conservatism”](#) is in the November 2018 issue of *Personality and Individual Differences*.

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