

## **Don't want to raise a psychopath? Be sensitive to a child's distress**

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How do you stop a child, especially one who has experienced significant adversity, from growing up to be a psychopath? Responsive, empathetic caregiving “—” especially when children are in distress “—” helps prevent boys from becoming callous, unemotional adolescents, according to a new Tulane University [study](#) of children raised in foster care.

The research, which was published in the [Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), is the first to show that an intervention can prevent the precursors to psychopathy.

Researchers measured levels of callous-unemotional behavior in 12-year-olds from the [Bucharest Early Intervention Project](#), a cohort of children abandoned in Romanian orphanages in the early 2000s and followed longitudinally ever since. Half of these children were placed in high-quality foster care as toddlers, while others grew up in institutional care. Researchers compared their results with children who had never been orphans. The study is led by Dr. Charles H. Zeanah from Tulane, Nathan A. Fox from the University of Maryland, and Charles A. Nelson from Harvard Medical School.

Overall, children reared in orphanages had significantly higher levels of callous-unemotional traits compared to children who had never been institutionalized. Boys placed in foster care had lower levels of callous-unemotional traits than those who did not receive the intervention. What explained the difference? Researchers observed children with their caregivers as toddlers and found that the more sensitive caregivers were to a young child's distress, the less callous and more empathic the boys were in adolescence.

Lead author Kathryn Humphreys, a who conducted the study as a postdoctoral fellow in infant mental health at Tulane, says the findings can help child welfare

advocates target and support specific caregiver behaviors when reaching out to families.

“If we can intervene early to help kids in their development, it not only helps them but also the broader society,” she says. “The best way to do that is making sure children are placed in homes with responsive caregivers and helping caregivers learn to be more responsive to their child"s needs.”