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Fatherhood can be the birth of positive change

A study that tracked males from age 12 to 19 found that the birth of a child had a calming, maturing effect.

Dalina Castellanos, Los Angeles Times *December 12, 2011*



A recent study found that some men dropped their delinquent ways when they became fathers. (Jade Brookbank / Getty Images / December 9, 2011)



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Ten tiny fingers and 10 tiny toes may be enough to change men's lives in ways they never thought possible. A recent study found that some men dropped their delinquent ways when they went from "hood" to fatherhood.

The research, conducted by scientists in Oregon and Texas, tracked 206 males from a medium-size metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. Participants were recruited at age 12 and assessed annually over 19 years, until age 31.

All males in the study were from neighborhoods with higher than average rates of juvenile delinquency and where kids were more prone to smoke, drink and participate in criminal actions. Half of the young men had used alcohol by age 12, and 70% of the participants had been arrested at least once during the study period.

As they grew older, the rates of drinking and smoking decreased — but when a baby entered the picture, they took an even deeper dive.

You can't easily turn your back on a criminal lifestyle or drinking and smoking," says study lead author David Kerr, an assistant professor of psychology at Oregon State University in Corvallis and lead author of the study, which was published in October in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. But, he says, the birth of a child seems to boost the effort.

Earlier studies have reported that marriage has a calming effect, but this report found that fatherhood does so in addition. The age at which participants became fathers seemed to matter, though: Those who became dads young, in their teens or early 20s, didn't clean up their acts as much as those who became fathers later on.

"The sense of being needed really plays a huge role," says Jerrold L. Shapiro, professor in the department of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University in Silicon Valley, who was not involved with the study. When men realize their actions no longer affect just themselves but also a human life that's completely dependent on them, some are more willing to make changes.

"I think there's something about your own child that hits an intrinsically basic core," Shapiro adds. "There's a huge amount of responsibility that most men will take on when they have a child."

Though the message is hopeful, a life-changing event like this doesn't always permanently shift a man's behavior. Some men reverted to their old ways after a while, says Kerr, whose is continuing to study the men to see what other changes occur over the course of participants' — and their children's — lives.

But if the time around a child's birth is a unique window of opportunity for troubled males, there are probably ways to help the process along, Kerr adds. Interventions — such as setting positive life goals with a social worker or attending new dad group meetings — could assist the men in figuring out what they would like to change for the benefit of their new family and supporting them in following through.

"When such men do become fathers, we shouldn't think, 'Oh, what a shame,'" says William Pollack, director of the Centers for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital and an assistant clinical professor in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, who has studied the transition to fatherhood for more than 25 years. "We now have a scientific basis that this is the time to intervene in a positive way."