

Genes may drive selection of friends

Thursday, Aug 30, 2007 - 12:04 AM

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As teens age into young adults, genes increasingly shape the choice of friends, a study of Virginia twins indicates.

As a young child and even as a teen, much of our social world is shaped by family, neighborhood and school, said the study leader, Dr. Kenneth Kendler, a behavioral geneticist at Virginia Commonwealth University. But as young adults assert independence, genes gain influence on determining the kinds of friends we hang out with, according to the study.

"People create different kinds of environments. You've got people who like to hang around with church-going, God-fearing folks and others who think there's nothing better than go have a fight at a local bar on Friday night," Kendler said. "A large proportion, not all of it, that's driving that individual difference is genetic factors."

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The federally funded study showing the genetic effect on creating our own social worlds was published in the August issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry. Kendler and VCU colleagues collaborated on the project with psychologists Kristen C. Jacobson, a former VCU post-doctoral researcher now at the University of Chicago, and Carol A. Prescott of the University of Southern California.

The researchers sought to examine the role of genes in teen behaviors "where you make people around you miserable," as opposed to making yourself miserable, Kendler said. This includes what parents and teachers often call acting out -- antisocial behavior, conduct disorders, and drug and alcohol abuse.

One of the strongest predictors of troubled behavior among those in their 20s is their childhood and adolescent peers, he said.

The VCU-led team sought to examine the link between behavior and changes in peer groups as individuals age.

The ability of a child or teen to resist peer pressure likely is an important factor in protecting the individual from acting out and later from substance abuse.

"What makes this so exciting is we've been able to really show how genetic factors cause you to shape your own social environment over time . . . is an important [determining factor] of later risks of psychiatric illness," Kendler said.

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The retrospective study involved nearly 1,800 white male adult twins who had participated in the Virginia Twin Registry, now part of the VCU Mid-Atlantic Twin Registry, between 1998 and 2004. Twin studies, especially those involving identical twins whose genetic makeup is alike, allow researchers to weigh the environmental factors at play in shaping personality, health and behavior.

The peer study focused on males because they tend to act out more, Kendler said. He would expect similar findings among girls and non-whites, he said, but noted that the data was limited to white males.

The participating twins were asked to recall their friends when they were between 8 and 25 years old: whether the friends smoked or drank; cut school; cheated; stole or damaged property; used or sold drugs and whether they got into trouble with the law. Their responses indicated that as the participants aged and developed their own social groups, genetic factors increasingly affected who they chose as peers.

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