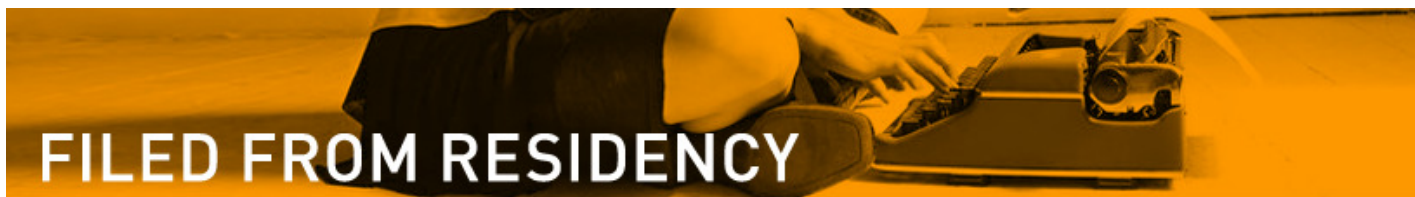




[NEWS ABOUT MEDILL](#) | [SEARCH](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [CALENDAR](#)

- [HOME](#)
- [ABOUT MEDILL](#)
- [ADMISSIONS](#)
- [2020 CURRICULA](#)
- [JOURNALISM](#)
 - [GENERAL INFO](#)
 - [UNDERGRADUATE JOURNALISM](#)
 - [GRADUATE JOURNALISM](#)
 - [GLOBAL JOURNALISM](#)
- [INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS \(IMC\)](#)
- [ALUMNI](#)
- [STUDENTS](#)
- [STUDENT WORK](#)
- [FACULTY](#)
- [EMPLOYMENT](#)
- [MEDILL MERCHANDISE](#)
- [MEDILL CHERUBS](#)
- [NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY](#)



Mum's the word on baby genes

by Rebecca Knowles, The Irish Times, Dublin
Thu, Nov 01, 2007

A mother's actions during and after pregnancy can influence children's behaviour, according to a child expert.

After decades of research in childhood aggression, the renowned child development expert Richard Tremblay has come to University College Dublin's Geary Institute with the goal of linking children's behaviour to that of their mothers during pregnancy.

In a project that will uniquely combine science and socio-economics, Tremblay, who is UCD's new professor of early childhood studies, will be part of a team that evaluates the effectiveness of Preparing for Life, a five-year school readiness scheme being organised by the Northside Partnership.

In the first of up to 20 such interventions planned across the State, researchers will recruit pregnant women from three disadvantaged areas in north Dublin, direct certain aspects of their lives and then follow the progress of their children from birth to age five.

The opportunity to document behaviour patterns but then also see the impact of changes made by pregnant mothers drew Quebec native Prof Tremblay to UCD after more than 30 years at the University of Montreal.

"Most of the research I've been doing is longitudinal, where we observe and describe," Prof Tremblay says. "But interventions are in fact experiments and they are the best way to learn why things happen. This time the interest is parenting, so we'll look at parents who lack parenting skills."

Funded by the Atlantic Foundation and the Office of the Minister for Health and Children, the study is the next logical step for Tremblay, whose earlier research findings challenged the long-held belief that children are not born aggressive.

His 1984 evaluation of 1,000 boys in Montreal tracked them from age six to 16, finding they acted aggressively as soon as they had the physical capacity, mainly by kicking and biting. Their aggression typically peaked at 17 months, and declined over time.

A SUBSEQUENT STUDY focused on the exceptions - those boys whose levels of aggression remained high as they aged. He found that those exceptions had something in common, younger, less-educated mothers, and this finding changed his research focus.

"We had started with children at six years old and realised we had started too late," he says. "We were finding that children with problems come from families with a history of behaviour problems. The mothers had troubles of their own in school and tended to smoke in pregnancy, and the parents were often separated."

The UCD project, he says, will help determine the extent to which the environment during pregnancy affects the way genes are expressed in the foetus, ultimately having a role in the child's behaviour. With a greater understanding of the relationship between a mother's pregnancy and her child's eventual behaviour, opportunities arise to prevent aggression before it starts.

"We had tended to focus on boys as the more aggressive sex but eventually realised we ought to help the girls who have problems in order to help the next generation, because it's not the boys who become pregnant," Prof Tremblay says. "It is a shift in terms of investment - although boys are more violent, the girls are more likely to be depressive."

AS A COLLABORATIVE research initiative between the Geary Institute and the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago, the project will see the involvement of Nobel laureate Prof James Heckman, an expert in the economics of child development.

His work has established a strong link between the early childhood environment and economic success into adulthood. As such, Prof Heckman is a proponent of early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds as an alternative to the higher societal costs involved in later approaches.

Prof Heckman sees the significant investment being made by the Irish Government in child development as an opportunity for Ireland to become a "leader in both the science of 'what works' for improving the lives of young children and also in delivering new and innovative policy."

The sentiment is shared by Prof Tremblay: "It was obvious there was going to be a lot of work done here on young children. I said to myself, 'What I can be doing right now in Ireland is more interesting than in Canada'."



NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

[ABOUT MEDILL](#) | [ADMISSIONS](#) | [JOURNALISM](#) | [INTEGRATED MARKETING](#)
[COMMUNICATIONS](#) | [ALUMNI](#) | [CURRENT STUDENTS](#) |
[STUDENT WORK](#) | [FACULTY](#) | [EMPLOYMENT](#)

Medill School Northwestern University 1845 Sheridan Road Evanston, IL 60208-2101 (847) 467-1882
[World Wide Web Disclaimer](#) and [University Policy Statements](#) ©2007 Northwestern University.