

Children of depressed moms do better when dad is involved

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Children whose mothers are depressed are less likely to develop problem behaviors if their fathers are actively engaged in family life, a Saint Louis University researcher finds.

It is well documented that children living in homes with depressed mothers are at increased risk of developing problems such as aggression, hyperactivity, depression and anxiety. However, an involved father – one who has a positive relationship with his children – may reduce the risk of those behaviors.

The 10-year, population-based study published in the July issue of the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, is the first to examine a father's role in a household with a depressed mother.

“My study corroborates findings from previous research that a child is at increased risk of problem behaviors when the mother is depressed,” said Jen Jen Chang, Ph.D., assistant professor of community health in epidemiology at the Saint Louis University School of Public Health and principal investigator.

“But once we factored in a father's positive involvement, I observed that the adverse impact of the mother's depression was attenuated. The father served as a buffer. He may have engaged with the children when the mother wasn't available due to her illness.”

The level of a father's involvement was based on questions given to

children age 10 and older. Investigators asked the children how often their father talked over important decisions with them; whether he listened to their side of an argument; whether he knew where they were when not at home; whether their father missed events or activities that were important to them; and how close they felt to their father.

Chang's study is unprecedented not only because it examined a father's role in a household with a depressed mother but because it followed the children with multiple assessments throughout childhood and adolescence in a continuous context.

Her results drew on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), an ongoing government-funded study of ethnically and economically diverse men and women and their labor market experiences. The NLSY contains detailed information about the biological children of these men and women, including each child's behavioral and social functioning. Chang's sample included 6,552 mother/child pairs. Child behavior problems were assessed every two years.

Chang said results of her study have important implications for intervention.

"I would advocate for health professionals to educate parents, specifically fathers, to be more involved with their children when their wives are diagnosed with depression. Mothers play an important role in a child's life. When she's mentally ill, the child is going to have difficulty, the whole family suffers. Fathers are in a position to negate that but may need a health professional's guidance."

Chang said her study was inspired by her family experience. Her sister suffered from mental illness and Chang witnessed how difficult the illness was on her sister, her family and her sister's family.

“My research has become a personal quest and I hope it will bring more focus to the issue of maternal depression,” she said. “Health care professionals must do a better job of screening for this debilitating and under-diagnosed illness.”

Chang next plans to study the effect of a mother’s depression on a child’s risk of substance abuse and whether a father’s positive involvement in a child’s life may reduce this risk.

Source: Saint Louis University

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