

Study confirms link between mothers' depression, young children's injuries

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Infants and toddlers whose mothers are severely depressed are almost three times more likely to suffer accidental injuries than other children in the same age group, according to a new study. The study's findings, published today in the Advanced Access edition of the Journal of Pediatric Psychology, suggest that proper treatment for depression would improve not only the mothers' health, but the health of young children as well.

Prior studies have shown that mothers who reported symptoms consistent with clinical depression had children who experienced a significant number of accidental injuries between the ages 3 months to 2 years.

In his study, UAB psychologist David Schwebel, Ph.D., director of the UAB Youth Safety Lab, examined the difference between mothers with severe, chronic depression and those who were moderately depressed as their children grew from birth to first grade.

A likely cause for the link between severe maternal depression and young children's injury risk is that chronically depressed mothers may not appropriately safeguard the physical environments that children engage in, Schwebel said. Another cause may be that symptoms of depression include inattention, poor concentration and irritability, which "might lead to poor or inconsistent supervision and enforcement of safety-related rules," he said.

Schwebel used a sample of 1,364 mothers included in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. The mothers were periodically asked to list all their children's injuries that had required professional medical treatment. Also, on four occasions during the study, the mothers were asked to rate how often they experienced symptoms of depression.

Only 2.5 percent of the mothers in the sample reported severe, clinical depression and 15.5 percent reported being moderately depressed. The researchers found that young children, from birth to 3 years, whose mothers suffered severe, chronic depression, were three times more likely to experience accidental injuries than infants and toddlers whose mothers were only moderately depressed.

The link between severe, chronic depression in mothers and injuries in young children remained consistent even when taking into account the families' socio-economic status, parenting styles, and the children's sex, temperament and behavior.

However, when children grew older, from age 3 to first grade, there was little difference in the injury rates of those whose mothers suffered from severe depression and those who reported being moderately depressed when the children were toddlers.

Although the study did not address why the older children fared better, Schwebel said older children often begin making their own decisions about whether to act in safe or dangerous ways. "Therefore, parents matter a little less - and in particular, inadequate supervision by a depressed mother might not influence the child's safety as much as it does during the toddler years."

Future research should consider the environment in which children are injured and the ages at which children are most susceptible to accidental

injuries when supervised by mothers who have depression. The various symptoms of maternal depression such as anger and irritability also should be considered, Schwebel said.

Source: University of Alabama at Birmingham

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