

Family stress and child's temper extremes contribute to anxiety and depression in children

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Small children who grow up in a family where the mother has psychological distress, the family is exposed to stress or is lacking social support, are at higher risk of developing anxious and depressive symptoms in early adolescence. Girls are more vulnerable than boys, and very timid or short-tempered children are more vulnerable than others to develop emotional problems. This is shown in a new doctorate study from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH).

Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental problems for children and adolescents.

Contributing factors to the development of symptoms of anxiety and depression while growing up is the key focus in the doctorate project by Evalill Karevold at the NIPH.

10-20% of all children and young people will, in the course of growing up, display enough symptoms of anxiety and depression to qualify for a diagnosis.

Environmental factors play an important role

Karevold has followed more than 900 families from when the children were 18 months old through to adolescence (data from the NIPH's TOPP-study). The findings are based on maternal and child report of the child's

symptoms of anxiety and depression, plus reports from the mother about risk and protective factors in the family environment.

A main finding highlights the importance of environmental factors for families with children less than 5 years of age. Maternal distress symptoms, family stress and lack of social support in their children's growing-up environment in pre-school age leads to an increase in anxiety and depression symptoms when these children reach 12-13 years old.

In addition, the results show that girls are more likely to develop emotional problems at 12-13 years of age than boys.

- Research indicates that girls tend to churn over problems and events more than boys. In addition, early puberty in girls is thought to make them extra vulnerable to developing depressive symptoms, says Evalill Karevold.

Timid children have a greater risk for anxiety and depression

Another discovery shows that shy children generally have a higher risk of developing anxiety and depression than children who are not shy. If timid boys are also very inactive, the risk of developing emotional difficulties is almost three times as high compared with shy boys with a high level of activity. This does not seem to be the case for girls.

The results indicate that there can be two central developmental paths to emotional problems in early adolescence. One path goes through the child's temperament, especially temperamental emotionality (tendency to react quickly and intensely). A different course goes through the environmental factors that are present when the children are at pre-school age.

- It is important to be aware of families who are struggling with multiple burdens, and who have little support or network around them when the children are young. Having pre-school aged children is believed to be a particularly vulnerable period to be exposed to maternal symptoms, so it is especially important to identify and help mothers who are struggling with anxiety and depression as early as possible. Health clinics can play a central role in spotting families who are struggling, and a lot more emphasis should be made to build up mental health expertise here, says Karevold.

Source: Norwegian Institute of Public Health

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