

# Sick Children Affect Parents' Mental Health

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Caring for a child with health problems profoundly affects the physical health, mental health and work attendance of parents, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

In a study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Whitney P. Witt and colleagues examined whether caring for a child with activity limitations resulted in poor health and missed time at work among [parents](#). [Children](#) with activity limitations have difficulty doing things most children their age can do.

Parents of children with activity limitations were more likely to have poor physical and mental health than parents of children without limitations. Parents of children with recently reported or persistent activity limitations were also more likely to have missed time at work than parents of children without limitations.

The paper, "The Impact of Childhood Activity Limitations on Parental Health, Mental Health, and Workdays Lost in the United States," was published in Academic Pediatrics today.

"Our results suggest that child health problems may have a rippling effect throughout the family," said lead author Witt, assistant professor of population health sciences. "Caring for these children can be stressful for families and pediatric health professionals may want to consider screening parents for mental and physical [health problems](#)."

Parents of children with persistent limitations were the most likely to suffer themselves. They were nearly twice as likely to report being in poor [physical health](#) and more than twice as likely to report having poor mental health. Among parents employed full time, those caring for children with ongoing limitations were more than three times as likely to report having recently missed time at work.

The researchers examined national data on 18,827 parents that was collected between 1996 and 2005 as part of the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS). The MEPS is a nationally representative household survey of adults in the United States.

Among the almost 19,000 parents, 15.6 percent of families have a child with an activity limitation. These are children who are limited or prevented in any way in their ability to do the things that most other children of their age can do (such as attending school or day care, or playing with friends).

Children who need or receive physical, occupational, or speech therapy were also included in this group. Activity limitations may be the result of a disability such as autism; a chronic health condition such as diabetes or asthma; or a temporary problem, such as a broken leg or seasonal allergies.

Witt said these results suggest that there may be benefits to a family-centered approach to health care.

"There are substantial health, [mental health](#), and work implications for parents caring for children with activity limitations. Addressing the needs of these parents could help improve the health and well-being of the whole family."

The potential for these parents to miss work also suggests that employers might benefit from providing support services for their employees.

"Employers should consider offering respite care or additional support services for families whose children have activity limitations. This could enable the parents to miss less work and may improve workplace productivity," Witt said.

Provided by University of Wisconsin

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