

Spanking 1-year-olds is common in depressed dads

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Chris Illuminati, 33, sits with his one-year-old son Evan in their Lawrenceville, N.J., home Thursday, March 10, 2011. New research finds a surprising number of depressed new dads spank their young children. Many cases stem from postpartum depression more commonly seen in new moms. A writer and stay-at-home dad, Illuminati said he had depression symptoms starting when his son was about 4 months old. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

Just like new moms, new fathers can be depressed, and a study found a surprising number of sad dads spanked their 1-year-olds.

About 40 percent of depressed fathers in a survey said they'd spanked kids that age, versus just 13 percent of fathers who weren't depressed. Most dads also had had recent contact with their child's doctor - a missed opportunity to get help, authors of the study said.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and many child development experts warn against spanking children of any age. Other studies have shown that kids who are spanked are at risk of being physically abused and becoming aggressive themselves.

The researchers said spanking is especially troubling in children who are only 1, because they could get injured and they "are unlikely to understand the connection between their behavior and subsequent punishment."

The study was released online Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The authors analyzed data on 1,746 fathers from a nationally representative survey in 16 large U.S. cities, conducted in 1999-2000. Lead author Dr. Neal Davis said that was the most recent comprehensive data on the subject, and he believes it is relevant today. Depression among fathers is strongly tied to unemployment rates, which are much higher now than a decade ago, he said.

The men were questioned about [depression symptoms](#), [spanking](#) and interactions with their 1-year-olds, but weren't asked why they spanked or whether it resulted in physical harm.

Overall, 7 percent of dads had experienced recent [major depression](#).

Some likely had a history of depression, but in others it was probably tied to their children's birth, similar to postpartum depression in women, Davis said. A pediatrician now with Intermountain Healthcare in Murray, Utah, Davis did the research while at the University of Michigan.

[Postpartum depression](#) is more common in women; by some estimates as many as 25 percent develop it shortly after [childbirth](#). Severe cases have

been linked with suicide and with deaths in children including several high-profile drownings.

Less is known about depression in new dads and the study raises important awareness about an under-recognized problem, said Dr. Craig Garfield, an assistant pediatrics professor at Northwestern University and co-author of a Pediatrics editorial.

With fathers increasingly spending time on child care, including taking their kids to routine doctor visits, it's important for pediatricians to pay attention to dads' mental health, Garfield said. Close to 80 percent of depressed and non-depressed dads had recent contact with their child's doctor, according to the study.

Davis said his office is working on screening dads for depression and offering referrals to mental health services - a practice he and his co-authors recommend for all pediatricians.

Chris Illuminati, a Lawrenceville, N.J., writer and stay-at-home dad with a 1-year-old son, says he read postpartum brochures the pediatrician gave his wife during an office visit. He said he found himself silently answering yes to questions about symptoms.

Illuminati said he'd never experienced [depression](#), but starting from the time his son was a few months old, he began feeling unusually down, sleep-deprived, trapped and resentful toward a baby who slept fitfully and had disrupted his life.

The 33-year-old father stressed that he loves his little boy, and has never spanked him, but has felt the frustration that might lead others to do so.

"There have been times where I've wanted to, but I've pulled back," Illuminati said.

Overall, 15 percent of fathers had recently spanked their children. Besides being more likely to spank, depressed dads were less likely to read to their kids - an activity the researchers called part of positive parenting. About equal numbers of depressed and non-depressed dads reported other positive interactions, such as playing games with their kids. The researchers said reading requires more focus that may be difficult when depressed.

Illuminati said he had been finding ways to avoid his son once his wife got home from work, and realized he probably needed help. "I didn't know who to talk to. I felt like a wuss if I mentioned it to anyone," he said.

Blogging about fatherhood helped, he said, and his sadness has mostly subsided now that his son is older.

"It should be studied," Illuminati said. "The hardest part is going to be getting guys to talk about it ... or even recognize it."

More information:

American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.aap.org>

Illuminati's blog: <http://messagewithabottle.tumblr.com/>

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