

# Babies born to stressed mothers more likely to be bullied at school, longitudinal study finds

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(Medical Xpress)—Children whose mothers were overly stressed during pregnancy are more likely to become victims of bullying at school.

New research from the University of Warwick shows stress and mental health problems in pregnant women may affect the developing baby and directly increases the risk of the child being victimised in later life.

The study has been published in the [Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry](#) and is based on 8,829 children from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC).

Professor Dieter Wolke, Professor of [Developmental Psychology](#) at University of Warwick and Warwick Medical School headed up the study.

He said: "This is the first study to investigate stress in pregnancy and a child's vulnerability to being bullied. When we are exposed to stress, large quantities of neurohormones are released into the blood stream and in a pregnant woman this can change the developing foetus' own [stress response](#) system.

"Changes in the stress response system can affect behaviour and how children react emotionally to stress such as being picked on by a bully. Children who more easily show a stress reaction such as crying, running away, anxiety are then selected by bullies to home in to."

The research team identified the main prenatal stress factors as severe family problems, such as financial difficulty or alcohol/drug abuse, and maternal mental health.

Professor Wolke added: "The whole thing becomes a vicious cycle, a child with an altered stress response system is more likely to be bullied, which affects their stress response even further and increases the likelihood of them developing [mental health problems](#) in later life."

**More information:** Lereya, S., Wolke, D., Prenatal Family Adversity and Maternal Mental Health. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.

Provided by University of Warwick

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