

First time parenting a positive experience for mental health, researchers find

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(Medical Xpress)—Becoming a parent for the first time may improve mental health and reduce levels of psychological distress, according to a new study from the University of Otago, Wellington (UOW).

That's the conclusion of research by Sarah Mckenzie and Dr Kristie Carter from the [Health Inequalities](#) Research Programme at UOW after examining the responses of 6670 parents in the Statistics New Zealand [longitudinal Survey](#) of Family, Income and Employment (SoFIE).

The study looked at three 'waves' of longitudinal data from 2004/05 to 2008/09, and has just been published in the international [Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health](#).

"This is good news for new parents in New Zealand as it shows the effects of becoming a parent for the first time tends to have a positive effect on parents' mental health. Whereas, no real impact on mental health was found for parents having subsequent (second, third or fourth) children," says Ms McKenzie.

"However, it's important to note the improvements in mental health and [psychological distress](#) are positive, but not large in our findings."

"Interestingly, unlike some overseas studies, we didn't find any major differences between men and women in changes in mental health and becoming a parent for the first time."

The researchers say one of the reasons why the University of Otago study differs is it used a large sample (N=6670) of New Zealanders, including both men and women, as well as married, single and co-habiting parents. Previous research has only focused on certain [population groups](#) such as first-time mothers or young parents.

The study did not collect information on the intentions of those who became pregnant and whether pregnancies were planned or not, so we cannot say exactly why there is an improvement. The study did however take into account [partner status](#), employment status, deprivation and [household income](#), Ms McKenzie says.

Further work is needed examining the impact of changes in socio-economic factors such as income and employment when a child comes along, as often there is a significant decrease in available income.

"At this point international evidence shows it's very important for welfare policies to support the economic position of new parents to ensure their mental health is supported during this major change to their life and their children," says Dr Carter.

Provided by University of Otago

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