

# Father absence in early childhood linked to depression in adolescent girls

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(Medical Xpress)—New research from the Children of the 90s study at the University of Bristol shows that girls whose fathers were absent during the first five years of life were more likely to develop depressive symptoms in adolescence than girls whose fathers left when they were aged five to ten years or than boys in both age groups (0-5 and 5-10), even after a range of factors was taken into account.

While previous studies have looked at the effect of childhood separation and divorce on the risk of depression in adolescence, this new research, published today [15 May] in *Psychological Medicine*, is one of only a few studies to look specifically at the effect of a father's absence and the timing of his departure on adolescents' mental health.

The study is one of the largest of its kind (5,631 children) and because [Children of the 90s](#) has charted the health and well-being of its

participants since birth, it is one of only a few able to demonstrate a strong link between early childhood father absence and teenage girls' risk of [depressive symptoms](#), even after a wide range of other factors that can contribute to depression – including home ownership, social status, financial problems, family size, [parental conflict](#), the mother's [educational background](#) and history of depression – are taken into account.

The authors say their findings are in line with previous studies suggesting that young children are more likely to suffer depression because they have developed fewer 'coping mechanisms' than older children, who also have more opportunities and resources to cope, as well as more [social support networks](#), e.g. friends, outside the family. Previous studies suggest that the stronger negative effect of father absence on the mental health of teenage girls over boys could be because girls are more vulnerable to negative interpersonal and family life events.

Iryna Culpin, the paper's lead author, said: "These findings indicate a need to include fathers in research related to child and adolescent mental health issues."

She also suggests that support for depression could be aimed at [teenage girls](#) whose father left before the age of five.

The authors highlight that it does not necessarily follow that a teenage girl who experiences depression as a teenager will continue to be affected later in life. They also point out that the study did not examine the level of contact nor the quality of the relationship between a child and an absent father, all of which could influence the risk of depression.

**More information:** Culpin, I. et al. Father absence and depressive symptoms in adolescence: findings from a UK cohort, *Psychological Medicine*.

Provided by University of Bristol

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