

Good marriage can buffer effects of dad's depression on young children

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What effect does a father's depression have on his young son or daughter? When fathers report a high level of emotional intimacy in their marriage, their children benefit, said a University of Illinois study.

"When a parent is interacting with their child, they need to be able to attend to the child's [emotional state](#), be cued in to his [developmental stage](#) and abilities, and notice whether he is getting frustrated or needs help. Depressed parents have more difficulty doing that," said Nancy McElwain, a U of I professor of human development.

But if a depressed dad has a close relationship with a partner who listens to and supports him, the quality of father-child interaction improves, she noted.

"A supportive spouse appears to buffer the effects of the father's depression. We can see it in children's behavior when they're working with their dad. The kids are more persistent and engaged," said Jennifer Engle, the study's lead author.

In the study, the researchers used data from a subset of 606 children and their parents who participated in the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development.

When their child was 4½ years old, parents ranked themselves on two scales: one that assessed [depressive symptoms](#) and another that elicited

their perceptions of [emotional intimacy](#) in their marriage. Parents were also observed interacting with their child during semi-structured tasks when the children were 4½, then 6½ years old.

"At this stage of a child's development, an engaged parent is very important. The son's or daughter's ability to focus and persist with a task when they are frustrated is critical in making a successful transition from preschool to formal schooling," Engle said.

Interestingly, depressed mothers didn't get the same boost from a supportive spouse.

That may be because men and women respond to depression differently, she added. "Men tend to withdraw; women tend to ruminate. We think that high emotional intimacy and sharing in the marriage may encourage a woman's tendency to ruminate about her depression, disrupting her ability to be available and supportive with her children."

Depressed men, on the other hand, are more likely to withdraw from their partners. "This makes emotional intimacy in the marriage an important protective factor for fathers," McElwain said.

The study emphasizes the need for depressed parents to seek support, if not from their spouses, from friends, family, and medical professionals, she added.

The article was published in *Developmental Psychology* and is available pre-publication online at <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2013-14498-001/>. Jennifer M. Engle, now of Sewanee, the University of the South, and Nancy L. McElwain of the University of Illinois are co-authors.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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