

Day care may help kids of depressed moms

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They showed fewer signs of emotional problems if they weren't cared for solely by their mother.

(HealthDay)—Young children of depressed mothers may develop fewer emotional problems if they spend time in some kind of day care, a new study suggests.

The Canadian research doesn't definitively prove that kids gain benefits from getting care from people other than their troubled mothers, and it doesn't examine the potentially high costs of alternative types of care. Nor does the study look at the role of fathers in caring for the kids.

However, experts said the study provides strong evidence of the value of day care when a mom is struggling with depression.

"The main message is that day care looks like it makes a huge difference in the long term," said Alan Kazdin, a child psychiatry professor at Yale University. "It's not trivial, and it's not just babysitting."

At issue are the children of mothers with depression, a condition that's estimated to strike 30 percent to 40 percent of mothers of childbearing age at some point. While it's difficult to fully understand how these kids are affected, "[depressed mothers](#) are likely to be more disengaged, inconsistent, negative and unresponsive, and less likely to be warm and supportive," explained Susan Campbell, a [psychology professor](#) at the University of Pittsburgh.

In the new study, the Canadian researchers followed 1,759 children between the ages of 5 months and 5 years. The investigators tracked the children's emotional problems (such as [separation anxiety](#) and inability to socialize with others) after the age of 17 months.

The researchers also followed their mothers, looking for signs of depression. And they monitored whether the kids were regularly cared for by relatives, outside babysitters or in day-care centers.

After adjusting statistics so they wouldn't be thrown off by various factors, the investigators found that about 12 percent of kids of non-depressed mothers showed signs of [emotional problems](#), said study author Catherine Herba, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Quebec at Montreal. But that number jumped to 32 percent among children of mothers who were depressed and didn't receive regular [child care](#) from anyone other than their mothers.

However, that number fell to 7 percent among kids whose mothers were depressed *and* were in [day care](#); it fell to between 15 percent and 18 percent for those whose mothers were depressed and were cared for by a relative or babysitter, Herba said.

What's going on? Campbell said group child care can provide structure, toys and activities, and opportunities to socialize with others kids while giving stressed-out mothers a break.

Herba said future research should explore other aspects of how child care influences the lives of [kids](#), such as how the quality of care affects the outcome. For now, she said, "we need to think about how we can better support [mothers](#) and families."

The study was published online June 19 in the journal *JAMA Psychiatry*.

More information: For more about [child care](#), try the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

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