

Dads' parenting of children with autism improves moms' mental health

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University of Illinois alumnus Daniel J. Laxman found that engaged fathers reduce moms' levels of depression in families of children with autism. Laxman currently is a postdoctoral trainee at the University of Wisconsin at Madison's Waisman Center Credit: Eric S. Drollette

Fathers who read to their infants with autism and take active roles in caregiving activities not only promote healthy development in their children, they boost moms' mental health too, new research suggests.

Mothers of [children](#) with autism reported fewer [depressive symptoms](#) when their children were 4 years old if the child's father engaged in literacy and responsive caregiving activities - such as soothing children

when they were upset or taking the child to the doctor - when the child was 9 months old, according to a new study conducted at the University of Illinois.

Lead author Daniel J. Laxman, who conducted the research for his doctorate in [human development](#) and family studies at Illinois, analyzed data on 3,550 children, including 50 children with [autism spectrum disorders](#) and 650 children with other disabilities.

Information also was collected on mothers' well-being and [fathers'](#) involvement in several parenting activities: literacy; play; routine caregiving, such as bathing; and responsive caregiving.

Greater involvement of fathers in caring for their children with autism may be especially important, as previous research has shown that mothers of these children often experience higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety than other mothers.

Fathers who read to their children, or respond when the child cries, can give the mothers respite, enabling mothers to perform other tasks or engage in self-care activities that boost their mood and reduce stress, said Laxman, who currently is a postdoctoral trainee at the University of Wisconsin at Madison's Waisman Center.

"One of the key criteria of autism is difficulty with communication, which may explain why these children's mothers are especially susceptible to stress and depression," Laxman said. "It can be very frustrating for parents - and upsetting for children - when children struggle with communication. If fathers are reading to their kids, telling stories or singing songs, it is going to be very beneficial for the child's development of communication skills and learning words. By improving children's communication skills, fathers' literacy activities may help alleviate some of the mothers' concerns and stress related to these

problems."

The families in the study were participants in the National Center for Education Statistics Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, which collected data on more than 14,000 children's development at the ages of 9 months, 2 and 4.

Prior research and work by early interventionists has focused solely on mothers' parenting of their children with autism, reflecting societal expectations that fathers are less involved, said co-author Brent A. McBride, a professor of human development and director of the Child Development Laboratory at Illinois.

"In family systems that include children with autism, the stressors are huge, and mothers need all the support they can grasp," McBride said. "Whether it comes from the child's father, their social network or online resources, mothers need additional support to be able to continue functioning in an effective way. We, as a society, have to ask men to become involved, and it's very important that men fully understand the reasons why their support and active engagement in parenting is so critical for the family's functioning and for the child."

The study sample was restricted to families in which both biological parents resided with the child for their first four years to ensure that the father's presence could influence the mother's depressive symptoms.

Training and professional development opportunities must be made available to early interventionists and other professionals who work with families so they can find ways to get fathers more involved in parenting activities, McBride said.

However, Laxman said that some prior research has suggested that conflict between [mothers](#) and fathers increases when men become more

involved in child care. Therefore, it's critical that parents discuss how they're going to handle discipline, or activities such as dressing the child or feeding them, and whether the [child](#) will be allowed to participate in making some of these decisions.

"It's really important if we want fathers to do more that moms and dads take time to discuss it, and recognize that they're going to have different perspectives, and that's completely OK," Laxman said. "In fact, it's probably good for kids to receive those different perspectives that adults bring. It's also important that parents try to be in as much agreement as possible, and when they're not in agreement, to reach a decision so they're interacting with their children in a consistent way."

A paper about the study appeared recently in *Maternal and Child Health Journal*.

More information: *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, [link.springer.com/article/10.1 ... 1608-7/fulltext.html](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10995-015-1608-7/fulltext.html)

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