

Now and Zen: Lower prenatal stress reduces risk of behavioral issues in kids

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STRESS MANAGEMENT

TIPS & TRICKS



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Tips and tricks to help expectant mothers manage stress. Credit: University of Ottawa

Parenting is a complicated journey full of questions, and when a beloved child begins to show signs of a behavioural disorder, a parent's challenges become even more difficult to navigate.

Expectant mothers may want to consider adopting today's trend towards [stress management](#), in light of new research from the University of Ottawa pointing to its ability to lower the risk of problematic behaviour in their offspring.

Dr. Ian Colman, associate professor at the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Medicine, led a team of researchers in examining data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. The team found that mothers who experience significant prenatal stress may be increasing their child's risk for behavioural issues.

"Mothers who are exposed to high levels of stress during pregnancy have kids who are more than twice as likely to have chronic symptoms of hyperactivity and conduct disorder," Dr. Colman said of the team's recently published findings.

"Hyperactivity is a symptom of ADHD, and about 10% of school-age children are affected by ADHD or conduct disorder," he said. "These disorders can lead to poor results in school and difficulties in their relationships with family and friends."

Behavioural disorders such as those seen by the researchers are characterized by aggressive or antisocial behaviour, high activity levels, and difficulty inhibiting behaviour. They are also associated with school

failure, substance use/abuse, and criminal activity, according to the paper.

A mother's stress can alter brain development in the fetus, and it is believed these changes may be long-lasting or permanent, said Dr. Colman.

The team was unique in its approach: it studied the effects of specific stressors on participants, as opposed to gauging overall stress levels. Participants reported [stressful events](#), such as problems at work, the illness of a relative, or an argument with a partner, family or friend. "Generally speaking, we found that the higher the stress, the higher the symptoms," Dr. Colman said. "We can't avoid most stressful events in our lives and since we can't always prevent them, the focus should be on helping mothers manage [stress](#) in order to give their children the best start in life."

More information: Nathalie MacKinnon et al, The Association Between Prenatal Stress And Externalizing Symptoms In Childhood: Evidence From The Avon Longitudinal Study Of Parents And Children, *Biological Psychiatry* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2017.07.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2017.07.010)

Provided by University of Ottawa

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