

Do mild depressive, anxiety symptoms in fathers predict behavioral and cognitive problems in children?

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Many people experience stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in their life. Times of transition, such as pregnancy and children starting

school can be significant periods of stress and vulnerability within families. Studies have generally found that high levels of anxiety and depression in parents are linked to poorer behavioral and cognitive outcomes in children.

Now, a team of researchers in Canada has examined if self-reported paternal anxious and [depressive symptoms](#) are associated with children's cognitive functioning and behavior. They found that slightly higher, but mild anxious or depressive symptoms in fathers were associated with fewer behavioral difficulties in the first years of elementary school and better scores on a standardized IQ testing in their children. The results need to be confirmed by further studies, the researchers said.

While the role of mothers' stress, anxiety and depression on children's behavioral and [cognitive development](#) is well established, less is known about the connection between fathers' [mental health](#) and children's development.

Now, a team of researchers affiliated to different institutions across Quebec, Canada has examined if paternal anxious and depressive symptoms, measured during their partner's pregnancy, and again 6 to 8 years later, are associated with children's cognitive function and behavior. They studied this association in a community sample, where parental levels of self-reported anxious and depressive symptoms were variable and typically less severe than among a clinically diagnosed population.

"Our findings show that fathers' reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression were not associated with worse behavioral and [cognitive outcomes](#) in their children, as previously found in other studies," said the study's first author, Dr. Sherri Lee Jones, a research associate at Douglas Research Center at McGill University. "More specifically, slightly higher levels of depressive symptoms reported by fathers when their

partner was pregnant were associated with fewer behavioral difficulties in their child at about 6 to 8 years of age." The article was [published](#) in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

What about the kids?

The first assessments, made during pregnancy and in infancy, included parental mental health and psychosocial measures, such as the parents' highest level of education, relationship satisfaction, and parenting perceptions. The second assessment was conducted at the critical age of 6 to 8 years, when children are expected to make increased use of their behavioral and cognitive skills.

"After accounting for the contribution of mothers' symptoms and parental education levels, we see that both parents matter in the cognitive-behavioral development of their children, however, potentially not in the same ways," Jones pointed out.

Higher symptoms of anxiety and depression among mothers were associated with adverse childhood behavioral outcomes, both at birth and during middle-childhood. In contrast, slightly higher, but still mild, depressive symptoms among fathers during the pregnancy were associated with fewer behavioral and emotional difficulties of children aged 6 to 8 years. This included [children](#) being able to sit still for long periods of time, infrequently losing their temper, and having a good attention span, as reported by parents in questionnaires.

These slightly higher symptoms of anxiety and depression among fathers when measured in childhood, and their associations with the child's performance on a standardized IQ test are in contrast to the patterns found among mothers.

Understanding parental influence

"It is unclear why we do not find a similar pattern for fathers as we do for mothers; namely that the father's reports of anxiety and depressive symptoms were not necessarily linked to poorer child outcomes," Jones said. None of the factors the researchers examined could explain the associations between the father's mental health symptoms and the child's outcomes. More studies are needed to understand the respective roles and the combined contribution of parents in child development, the researchers said.

They further pointed out that their findings are based on a community sample. Parents self-reported varying levels of anxious and depressive symptoms and didn't receive a diagnosis by a mental health professional, which might mean that the findings may not be generalizable to parents who are experiencing clinical levels of depression and [anxiety](#).

"We believe that this study will enhance our understanding of how a child's development might be influenced by the relative and combined mental health symptoms of both the mother and father, which exhibit a lot of individual variability," Jones concluded.

More information: Longitudinal associations between paternal mental health and child behavior and cognition in middle childhood. *Frontiers in Psychology*. DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1218384](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1218384).
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