

Mother's behavior has strong effect on cocaine-exposed children

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A study by Rina Das Eiden has shown that a mother's harshness toward her child is a predictor of problem behaviors in kindergarten.

It is not only prenatal drug exposure, but also conditions related to drug use that can influence negative behavior in children, according to a new study from the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions.

In examining the long-term effects of cocaine use during pregnancy in a sample of low-income, cocaine-exposed and non-exposed families, researchers found that a mother's harshness toward her child during mother-child interactions at 2 years of age is one of the strongest predictors of [problem behaviors](#) in kindergarten, such as fighting, aggression and defiance.

Rina Das Eiden, PhD, the study's principal investigator, is conducting a multi-year study on the direct and indirect effects of prenatal drug use, following more than 200 mother and child pairs. It is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Maternal harshness, such as threats of physical discipline, can be influenced by drug use. Animal

studies have shown that prenatal cocaine use can affect parenting by lowering the bonding hormones mothers usually experience after birth, resulting in less emotional engagement with the child.

"Although [prenatal cocaine exposure](#) clearly can have [negative health effects](#) on children, the behavior problems may not only be due to what happens in the womb, but also to the effects of cocaine use on the mother," Eiden says. "Higher maternal harshness in cocaine-using mothers could also be due to other unmeasured variables, such as the mothers' own childhood experiences.

"Women who use [cocaine](#) have a harder time helping their children learn to self-regulate their behavior in the preschool years, which can lead to more [negative behavior](#) in kindergarten," she says.

Other risks factors shown to negatively affect [behavior](#) of all children in this low-income sample are a higher likelihood of hunger and living in communities that regularly experience violence.

Eiden says parenting interventions in high-risk family situations while children are young may help reduce maternal harshness and promote self-control in children.

The study, published in a recent edition of *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, was co-authored by Claire Coles, PhD, Emory University School of Medicine; Pamela Schuetze, PhD, SUNY Buffalo State; and Craig Colder, PhD, UB professor of psychology.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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