

# Even mother's mild depressive symptoms affect the child's emotional well-being

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/Public Domain

According to recent research, even mild long-term depressive symptoms among mothers are connected with emotional problems among small

children such as hyperactivity, aggressiveness and anxiety.

The study investigated how the [depressive symptoms](#) of both parents affected the child by the age of two and five.

The father's depressive symptoms affected the child's [emotional problems](#) only if the mother was depressed as well. The mother's symptoms, however, affected the child even if the father was not depressed.

Moderate depressive symptoms can be observed in over 20% of parents in Finland. Most serious symptoms are seen in less than 9% of mothers and around 2.5% of fathers.

"Depression among parents both during and after pregnancy not only affects the person suffering from depression but also has a long-term impact on the well-being of the newborn child. Even in cases of mild depression, it is important that the symptoms are identified and the parents are offered support as early as possible, if necessary already during the pregnancy," explains Visiting Researcher Johanna Pietikäinen from the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL).

"In families, depression experienced by the mother has a key impact on the child's well-being. In Finland, the maternity clinic system functions well, but attention should be paid to depressive symptoms among mothers over a longer period: from the pregnancy through to the end of the child's first year of age," she adds.

## **One parent's depression also puts the other at risk**

The depression of one parent is a factor that can put the other parent at risk of depression as well. In addition, depressive symptoms among mothers and fathers are quite long-term: they can start already during

pregnancy and continue past the child's first birthday.

"It is important to monitor the mental well-being of both [parents](#) during pregnancy and after the birth of the child, and if one parent shows symptoms of depression then the symptoms of the other parent should also be examined. Currently, however, fathers' psychological well-being is not necessarily covered by depression questionnaires in maternity clinics, for example," Pietikäinen points out.

## **Prior depression is the most significant risk factor**

Long-term depression is an indication that the depression may have been experienced already before the pregnancy. Previous experience of depression was, in fact, one of the key risk factors for moderate or severe depressive symptoms.

Other significant risk factors included [sleep deprivation](#) during [pregnancy](#), stress, anxiety and a bad family environment. These most prominent risk factors were predictors for [depression](#) among both [mothers](#) and fathers.

**More information:** Johanna T. Pietikäinen et al, Maternal and paternal depressive symptoms and children's emotional problems at the age of 2 and 5 years: a longitudinal study, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13126](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13126)

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