

Maternal health and child behaviour: The more problems moms have, the greater the risk for their kids

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The Bottom Line:

Children who live in families with multiple social and health-related problems are at high risk of developing behaviour problems as preschoolers. The risk of child behaviour problems increased as the number of the mothers' problems did. The problems that the parents experienced are part of a wider social situation that may promote unhealthy behaviours and contribute to the development of mental health disorders. This study highlights the fact that increasing numbers of problems increase the likelihood and severity of child behaviour problems in the preschool years. Interventions that improve family circumstances and address the underlying causes of mental health disorders, especially maternal depression and substance abuse, may help to reduce the risk for behaviour problems in small children.

What problem is being addressed?

The health and well-being of parents, especially mothers, has a major impact on their child's development. However, most studies have focused on the impact of a single health condition (a mental health problem, substance abuse or family violence, for instance) rather than a combination of problems. This study set out to examine whether children of mothers who have multiple problems are at greater risk of having behaviour problems.

How was the information gathered?

This was a study of more than 2,500 children followed from birth. Mothers and fathers were interviewed about their own mental health and substance use in the first year after delivery. Mothers were also asked about their experience of domestic abuse in the same time period. When the children were 3 years old, the mothers were asked to complete a checklist describing their child's behaviour. This information was used to see if it was possible to predict child behaviour problems based on the social and medical problems of their mothers.

What is the *real scientific* evidence?

Half of the mothers had at least one health problem, and 22% of the children had behaviour problems. One year after the birth of their child,

- 14% of mothers had symptoms of a major depression,
- 4% reported symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder,

- more than 27% smoked, (a risk factor for child development and behaviour problems),
- 5% reported binge drinking or illicit drug use,
- 21% reported emotional domestic abuse, and
- 9% reported physical domestic abuse.

About one third of the mothers reported more than one of these problems at the same time.

The more problems reported by mothers, the worse the child's behaviour problems. Children of mothers with both depression and anxiety seemed to have the worst problems.

Fathers reported fewer mood problems and more smoking and binge drinking, but it was only the fathers' depression that increased child behavior problems. Lack of fathers' involvement with the family increased child depression/anxiety or inattention/hyperactivity problems.

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The preceding is a summary of:

Whitaker RC, Orzol SM, Kahn RS. *Maternal mental health, substance use, and domestic violence in the year after delivery and subsequent behavior problems in children at age 3 years*. Archives of General Psychiatry 2006, 63: 551-560.