

The parenthood paradox: Certain parenting beliefs are detrimental to mothers' mental health

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Does being an intense mother make women unhappy? According to a new study by Kathryn Rizzo and colleagues, from the University of Mary Washington in the US, women who believe in intensive parenting - i.e., that women are better parents than men, that mothering should be child-centred, and that children should be considered sacred and are fulfilling to parents - are more likely to have negative mental health outcomes. The work is published online in Springer's *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

Parenting can be quite challenging and requires wide-ranging skills and expertise - a big task. Many women idealize parenthood as one of the most fulfilling experiences in life. However, some research suggests that parenting may be detrimental to mental health. For example, women have reported that taking care of their children is more stressful than being at work. There have also been suggestions that intensive parenting can result in increased stress and [guilt](#), particularly for women. This [discrepancy](#) is known as the [parenthood](#) paradox.

Rizzo and team looked at whether intensive parenting in particular, rather than parenting per se, was linked to increased levels of stress, depression and lower [life satisfaction](#) among 181 mothers of children under 5 years old. Using an online questionnaire, the authors measured to what extent mothers endorsed intensive parenting beliefs: mothers are the most necessary and capable parent; parents' happiness is derived primarily from their children; parents should always provide their children with stimulating activities that aid in their development; parenting is more difficult than working; a parent should always sacrifice their needs for the needs of the child.

Overall, the women were satisfied with their lives

but had moderate [levels of stress](#) and depression. Approximately 23 percent had [symptoms of depression](#). Negative mental health outcomes were accounted for by women's endorsement of intensive parenting attitudes. When the level of family support was taken into account, those mothers who believed that women are the essential parent were less satisfied with their lives; those who believed that parenting is challenging were more stressed and depressed.

The authors conclude: "If intensive mothering is related to so many negative mental health outcomes, why do women do it? They may think that it makes them better mothers, so they are willing to sacrifice their own mental health to enhance their children's cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. In reality, intensive parenting may have the opposite effect on children from what parents intend."

More information: Rizzo KM, Schiffrin HH, Liss M (2012). Insight into the parenthood paradox: mental health outcomes of intensive mothering. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*; DOI 10.1007/s10826-012-9615-z

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