

# Kids, especially boys, perceive sadness of depressed parents

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Children of depressed parents pick up on their parents' sadness—whether mom or dad realizes their mood or not.

A new University of Michigan study indicates that children who have at least one parent suffering from depression are very skilled at picking up on [facial cues](#). Boys living in this environment are highly sensitive to facial expressions of [sadness](#), said Nestor Lopez-Duran, assistant professor of psychology and one the study's authors.

Researchers analyzed data on 104 children ages 7-13, of whom about 60 percent were at high-risk for depression because at least one of their parents were diagnosed with depression. The participants looked at pictures of facial expressions that varied from neutral to sadness and [anger](#), or viewed images of faces morphing from anger to sadness. After each picture was shown, the children indicated whether the face showed sadness, anger or no emotion.

Lopez-Duran said high-risk boys were more

sensitive to subtle expressions of sadness than their peers, including high-risk girls.

There are a few reasons why this may be the case, he said. There's growing evidence suggesting that the underlying processes that put kids at risk for depression and other conditions may be different for boys and girls.

It may be that high sensitivity to sadness influences how boys see their social world, which may make them less social in important situations, Lopez-Duran said. For instance, unlike girls, who tend to be highly social, boys are less likely to use others as sources of comfort when they are sad.

On the other hand, it's also possible that this unique skill does not reflect an underlying vulnerability, he said. This skill may be an adaptive strategy that develops in response to the environment. Specifically, boys are more likely than girls to receive harsh punishment, and parental [depression](#) increases the risk of using harsh punishment.

"It is possible that these high-risk boys developed this skill in order to reduce the possibility of getting harsh punishment by essentially recognizing when mom or dad is upset and getting out of the way," Lopez-Duran said.

The takeaway message is that boys of depressed parents appear to be very perceptive of sadness, he said. In fact, these [boys](#) may be able to tell when parents are upset even when parents think they are not showing signs.

The findings appear in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ...](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10...)  
[.54.issue-5/issuetoc](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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