

Positive father-child relationship can moderate negative effects of maternal depression

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Maternal depression negatively impacts children's emotional and cognitive development and family life. Studies have shown that a home in which the mother suffers from depression exhibits lower cohesion, warmth, and expressiveness and higher conflict, rigidity, and affectionless control. Since 15-18% of women in industrial societies and up to 30% in developing countries suffer from maternal depression, it is of clinical and public health concern to understand the effects of maternal depression on children's development.

A family affair

A new study, published in *Development and Psychopathology*, by Prof. Ruth Feldman and colleagues at the Department of Psychology and Leslie and Susan Gonda (Goldschmied) Multidisciplinary Brain Research Center at Bar-Ilan University has, for the first time, examined whether fathering can moderate the [negative effects](#) of maternal depression on [family](#)-level functioning.

The results of this study are the first to describe the family process by using direct observations of mothering, fathering, and family patterns in homes where mothers suffer clinical depression during the [child's](#) first years of life.

Feldman conducted a longitudinal study of a carefully selected sample of married or cohabiting chronically depressed women with no comorbid contextual risk, who were repeatedly assessed for maternal depression across the first year after childbirth and when the child reached age six. The families were home-visited when the child reached preschool age in order to observe and videotape mother-child, father-child, and both-parent-child interactions.

Sense and sensitivity

During the first years of life, sensitivity marks the most critical component of the parental style that affects the child's emotional and social development. Sensitive parents are attuned to their child's needs and attend to them in a responsive and nonintrusive manner. Parents who act intrusively tend to take over tasks that children are, or could be, performing independently, imposing their own agenda without regard for the child.

In Feldman's study depressed mothers exhibited low sensitivity and high intrusiveness, and children displayed lower social engagement during interactions with them. Partners of depressed mothers also showed low sensitivity, high intrusiveness, and provided little opportunities for child social engagement, so that the family unit was less cohesive, harmonious, warm, and collaborative. However, when fathers were sensitive, nonintrusive, and engaged children socially, maternal depression no longer predicted low family cohesion.

Feldman: "When fathers rise to the challenge of co-parenting with a chronically depressed mother, become invested in the father-child relationship despite little modeling from their wives, and form a sensitive, nonintrusive, and reciprocal relationship with the child that fosters his/her social involvement and participation, fathering can buffer the spillover from maternal depression to the family atmosphere."

According to Feldman, because rates of maternal [depression](#) appear to increase each decade, and paternal involvement in child care is constantly increasing in industrial societies, it is critical to address the fathers' potential contribution to family welfare by providing interventions for the development of a sensitive parenting style and other compensatory mechanisms, in order to enhance their role as buffers of the negative effects of [maternal depression](#).

More information: *Development and Psychopathology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1017/S095457941700044X](#)

Provided by Bar-Ilan University

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