

Very preterm birth not associated with mood and anxiety disorders, new research finds

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Do very-preterm or very-low-weight babies develop anxiety and mood disorders later in life? Julia Jaekel, assistant professor of child and family studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Dieter Wolke, professor of psychology at the University of Warwick, co-authored a study to answer this question.

The team studied nearly 400 individuals from birth to adulthood. Half of the participants had been born before 32 weeks gestation or at a very low birth weight (less than 3.3 pounds), and the other half had been born at term and normal birth weight. They assessed each participant when they were 6, 8 and 26 years old using detailed clinical interviews of psychiatric disorders.

"Previous research has reported increased risks for anxiety and mood disorders, but these studies were based on small samples and did not include repeated assessments for over 20 years," said Jaekel.

Their results? At age 6, children were not at an increased risk of any anxiety or mood disorders,

but by age 8—after they had entered school—more children had an anxiety disorder. By 26, there was a tendency to have more mood disorders like depression, but the findings were not meaningfully different between the two groups.

This study is the first investigation of anxiety and mood disorders in childhood and adulthood using clinical diagnoses in a large whole-population study of very preterm and very-[low-birth-weight](#) individuals as compared to individuals born at term.

The team also found that having a romantic partner who is supportive is an important factor for good mental health because it helps protect one from developing anxiety or depression. However, the study found fewer very-preterm-born adults had a [romantic partner](#) and were more withdrawn socially.

"Adults without support from romantic partners are at increased risk to develop anxiety and mood disorders," said Wolke. "Social support is important to prevent anxiety or [mood disorders](#)."

It is also the largest study that's been done following very-preterm-born children from childhood to adulthood. Thus, it provides compelling and reassuring evidence that very-preterm birth is not associated with an [increased risk](#) of psychiatric mood and [anxiety](#) disorders.

The study will appear in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.

More information: Julia Jaekel et al. Mood and anxiety disorders in very preterm/very low-birth weight individuals from 6 to 26 years, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2017). DOI: [10.1111/jcpp.12787](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12787)

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