

The mental health of fathers of babies born very prematurely

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Becoming a dad and preparing for fatherhood can be daunting and for those who have had a baby born very prematurely, there can be extra pressures and responsibilities to navigate. A recent collaborative study,

involving the Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health at Monash University, takes a look at the mental health of fathers of babies born very prematurely and the impact on their early parenting behaviors.

Following the journey of 100 [fathers](#) of [babies](#) born before 30 weeks' gestation, the study found that almost one in five fathers experienced high depressive symptoms, and approximately half of all fathers experienced moderate anxiety symptoms that persisted throughout the first year of their baby's life.

However, the study also found the experience of more severe mental health symptoms had little effect on fathers' parenting behaviors with their baby at 12 months.

Led by Grace McMahon from the Turner Institute and conducted in the Centre for Research Excellence in Newborn Medicine at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, the study asked fathers about their symptoms of depression and anxiety shortly after the baby's birth, around the baby's expected due date, and then again at three, six and 12 months after the baby's expected due date. At 12 months, fathers and their babies were videotaped during a play session to look at a range of parenting behaviors.

Ms McMahon said that fathers' experiences following very [premature birth](#) are rarely studied but are crucial to understand given the potential stress associated with concerns about their baby's health and managing family and [work activities](#), as well as the importance of fathers for the babies' wellbeing and development.

"The high rates of fathers reporting persistent mental health difficulties in this study is concerning and highlights the need to include fathers in ongoing mental health screening and support following very premature birth," Ms McMahon said.

"While our finding of minimal impact of depression and anxiety symptoms on fathers' early parenting behaviors is encouraging news for fathers suffering with [mental health](#) difficulties, we do believe that these relationships are complex and further research is needed to better understand the experiences of fathers following very premature birth".

More information: Grace E McMahon et al. Mental Health Trajectories of Fathers Following Very Preterm Birth: Associations With Parenting, *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/jpepsy/jsaa041](#)

Provided by Monash University

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