

Male postnatal depression affects child behaviour, study shows

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[Postnatal depression](#) in fathers can have long-term psychological effects on their children, a new study reveals.

The babies of depressed men are twice as likely to suffer from behavioural problems in later years as those whose fathers are not depressed, the Children of the 90s survey by the University of Bristol found.

The results reflected the father's role in socialising their children and raised questions about the age at which children become sensitive to their parents' moods, researchers said.

Psychiatrists warned that the findings could be a portent of future social problems as paternal postnatal depression becomes more widespread.

Postnatal depression is said to affect about one mother in 10 but is less well recognised, and more controversial, in new fathers. Different research has found that 3-10% of men are affected.

The Children of the 90s figures are the second batch to be published.

The first figures, released three years ago, found that boys of depressed fathers appeared twice as likely as other boys to develop behavioural problems by the age of three and a half.

The latest figures, which are not divided by sex, point to a "persisting and clinically significant level of disturbance" that has significant implications for the future functioning of the children affected and for society, the authors of the study wrote.

"Conduct problems at this age are strongly predictive of later serious conduct problems, increased criminality and significantly increased societal costs," Paul Ramchandani, an Oxford University psychiatrist, wrote in the paper, which was published in the Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry this month.

The findings showed that eight weeks after the birth of their child, of 8,430 fathers, 303 or 3.6% were depressed. The study covered nearly 14,000 families with children born between April 1991 and December 1992.

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A psychiatric analysis of this group's children seven years later found that 11.9% of them were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders - such as attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression or antisocial behaviour – compared with 6.3% of the children of fathers who had not been depressed.

When other factors such as maternal postnatal depression and social background were taken into consideration, the depressed group still had a 66% increase in the odds of being diagnosed with any psychiatric condition, and a near doubling of the odds of an "oppositional defiant/conduct disorder" such as hyperactivity, behavioural problems and socialising difficulties.

"To our knowledge this is the first population cohort study to demonstrate a clear link between depression in fathers in the postnatal period and later psychiatric disorders in their children," Ramchandani said.

"Depression in fathers seems specifically related to behavioural and peer relationship difficulties, whereas maternal depression appears to be associated with a broader spectrum of child disturbance."

He said it was unclear whether the early days of a child's life were a particularly vulnerable period during which the infant was receptive to the effects of the moods of people around it.

"The finding from this study that paternal depression early in the child's life is associated with these persisting problems... [raises] the possibility that such a sensitive period may be operative, particularly in relation to the effects of parental depression."

Ramchandani said his study showed the importance of recognising depression in new fathers and providing effective treatments for it.