

# The impact of fathers' poor mental health on children at different ages

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## Research summary

### **Pre-conception**

A review found fathers' mental disorders pre-conception affecting the neurodevelopment, moods and behaviours of their child through genetic and non-genetic mechanisms – some of which are potentially modifiable (Tan et al., 2023)

A review found a personal history of poor mental health in fathers (i.e. *identifiable before conception*) associated with their depression/anxiety after the birth (Ansari et al., 2021)

### **During pregnancy**

In the Netherlands, fathers' depressive symptoms during pregnancy increased the likelihood of excessive infant crying ('colic') in the early weeks after the birth (van den Berg et al., 2009)

In Norway, increasing antenatal psychological distress in fathers was associated with an increase in 'hitting' by boys between 18 months and three years of age (Kvalevaag et al., 2022)

In Finland, very high paternal stress measured antenatally (at 3 months) was associated with child total problems at 24 months (Challacombe et al., 2023)

### **During both the pregnancy and in the year after the birth**

In the UK, children whose fathers were depressed in both the antenatal and postnatal periods (chronic depression) had the highest risks of subsequent psychopathology, measured by child total problems at age 3½ years and psychiatric diagnosis at age 7 years (Ramchandani, O'Connor, et al., 2008).

An international review found an association between fathers' poor perinatal mental health and risk of child maltreatment (Ayers et al., 2019)

### **In the year after the birth**

In the UK, depression in fathers in their infant's first year was associated with higher depression scores in those children at ages 9–11 (Opondo et al., 2017; Opondo et al., 2016); in daughters at age 18 (Gutierrez-Galve et al., 2019); and, when the father's level of education was low, in both sons and daughters at age 16 (Pearson et al., 2013).

Depression in fathers in the postnatal period was significantly associated with psychiatric disorder in their children 7 years later), most notably oppositional defiant/conduct disorders (Ramchandani, Stein, et al., 2008)

### **When their children are in primary school**

In the UK, children aged 11 living with a father who has depression are more likely to develop depression and not achieve educational milestones, compared to children who live with a father who has a history of depression (but no active depression during their child's lifetime) and compared to those living with a father without depression (Brophy et al., 2021).

Psychological distress in both biological fathers and father figures predicts hyperactivity, as well as conduct, emotional and peer problems, through childhood up to child-age 14, particularly in poorer and ethnic minority families (Flouri et al., 2019).

### **During their children's adolescence**

A review found fathers' depression when their children are teenagers associated with the teenagers' own depression and anxiety, often due to negative parenting by the father of the teenager: the father's hostility towards them, time (not) spent with them, conflict with his child's mother, harsh parenting and low levels of warmth (Sweeney & MacBeth, 2016).

An analysis of the large-scale representative UK panel study dataset found fathers' mental distress associated with daughters', but not sons' unhappiness (Webb et al., 2017); while an analysis of another large-scale dataset (Flouri et al., 2019) found fathers' distress associated with greater severity in conduct and other 'externalising' behaviours in adolescent sons than daughters.

In 3 studies (USA and UK), fathers' depression at child age 13 was associated with an increased risk of negative adolescent functioning, specifically internalizing symptoms, in offspring ages 11 to 21 years old (Reeb et al., 2010; Reeb et al., 2015; Shelton & Harold, 2008).

### **Fathers' poor mental health during their children's adulthood**

A longitudinal study that differentiated anxiety and depression in fathers found sons of fathers with early and mid-adulthood depression more than twice as likely to develop depression themselves across the course of their lives than sons of 'non-case' fathers. Where the father had been classified as 'anxious', their daughters were almost twice as likely to develop anxiety as daughters of 'non-case' fathers (Reising et al., 2019).

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