
What are the Effects of Mothers' and Fathers' Depression and Thoughts of Death on Their Children's Level of Parental Connectedness?

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health outcomes such as depression are often passed down in families. While links between the mental health symptoms of parents and their children have been established, there is a limited understanding of these outcomes over time and the impact that mothers and fathers have on their children independently. Understanding the mechanisms within families that lead to positive health outcomes is important for designing interventions to improve children's lives. Feeling close to others—knowing that others care and are there during times of distress—is protective for many mental health conditions. This brief focuses on parent-child connectedness, which has been shown to both decrease children's distress and strengthen their social coping resources.

This study extends the current understanding of the relationship between parental mental health and child outcomes by evaluating the impact of parents' patterns of depression and thoughts of death on their children's appraisals of how connected they feel to each of their parents separately. This study analyzes data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which followed 4,706 children born to mostly unmarried parents until age nine. Parental depression and thoughts of death were measured when the child was ages one, three, five, and nine. Mothers and fathers were asked if, during the previous 12 months, they had feelings of sadness/depression for two or more weeks. Those who reported sadness/depression were also asked if they "thought a lot about death during those two weeks." Children reported on their connectedness to their parents—how close they felt to each parent and how well they shared ideas with each parent—when they were nine years old. In data analyses, the authors explore the effects of the mothers' and fathers' chronic and episodic depressive symptoms and thoughts of death on their children's level of parental connectedness at age nine.

KEY FINDINGS

Children felt less connected to both their mothers and fathers with mental health symptoms but the effects varied somewhat based on the sex of the parent.

Parental Depression and Thoughts of Death

- > Both mothers and fathers reported similar rates of depression over time. This is surprising because women tend to report higher levels of depression than men.
 - > Parents' self-reported levels of depression peaked at over 15% when children turned three years old and declined steadily as children grew older to roughly 10% when children were nine years old.
- > A similar percentage of mothers and fathers reported thoughts of death, ranging from 3% to 5% over time.

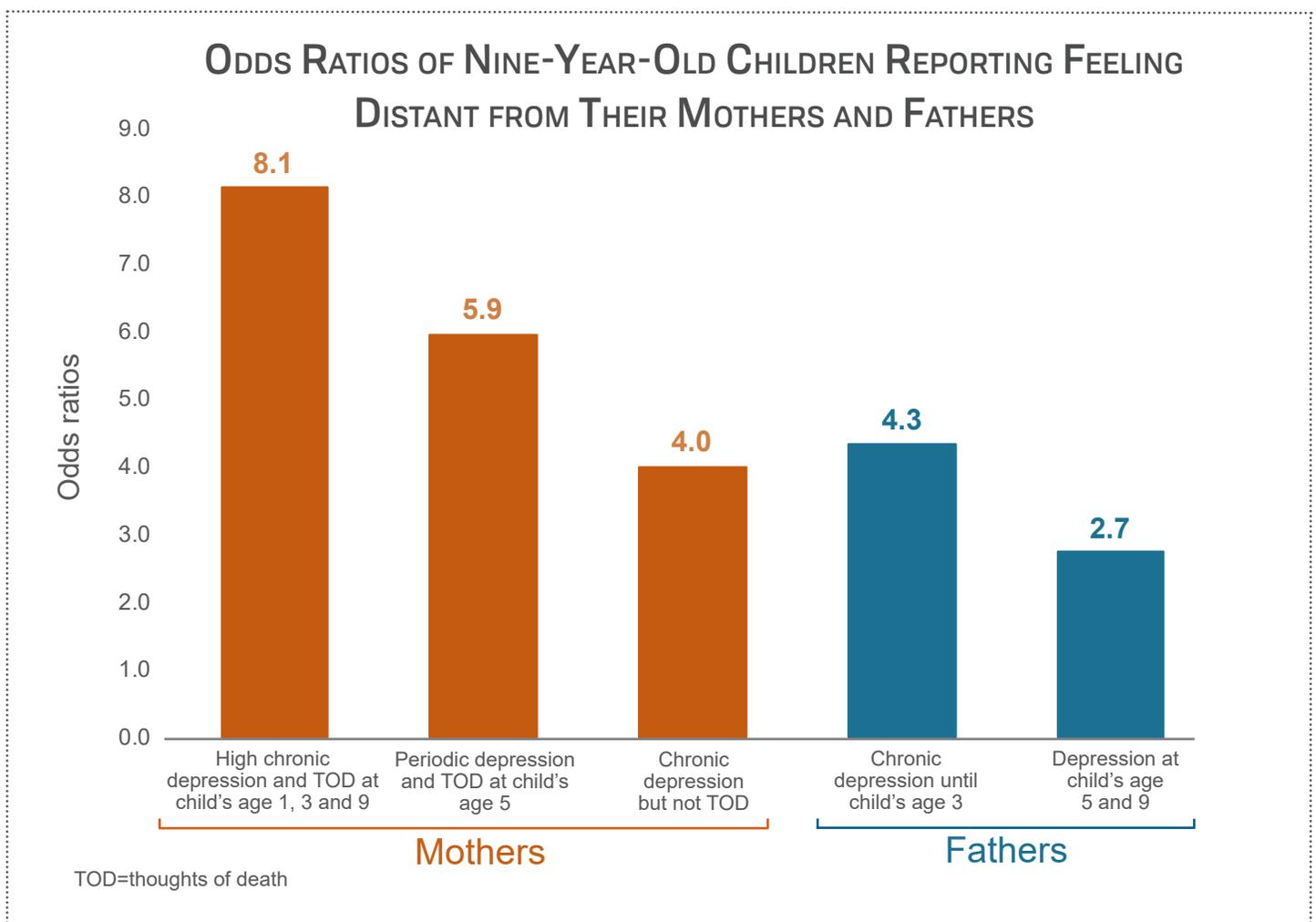
Parent-Child Connectedness, According to Children at Age Nine

- > Sixty-three percent of nine-year-old children reported feeling "extremely" or "quite" close to their mothers compared to 50% who felt that level of closeness with their fathers.
- > Likewise, 54% of children reported that they shared ideas or talked about important topics "extremely" or "quite" well with their mothers compared to 42% who reported doing so with their fathers.

KEY FINDINGS, CONTINUED

Effects of Parental Depression and Thoughts of Death on Parent-Child Connectedness (see figure)

- > Children whose mothers reported chronic depression and thoughts of death were significantly more likely to report feeling distant from their mother—they felt less close and shared fewer ideas—than those whose mothers did not report mental health issues, even if depression and thoughts of death were periodic or if the mother reported depression and no thoughts of death.
- > Children whose fathers reported chronic depressive symptoms and thoughts of death were more likely to report feeling a lack of closeness to their fathers.
 - > However, these symptoms did not affect the extent to which the child reported sharing important ideas with their father.



This figure shows that, compared to nine-year-old children whose mothers did not report having mental health issues, children whose moms reported mental health problems were more likely to feel distant from them. Likewise, children whose fathers had depression were more likely to feel distant from them, compared to children whose dads did not report depression.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest the importance of examining upstream approaches to mental health, such as yearly mental health screenings of students and their family members to document and continually assess whether, when and why a child's symptoms start. Schools and social service agencies are often slow to act upon health promotion initiatives, especially in underserved communities, often waiting until symptoms or behaviors become potentially harmful to the individual or disruptive to the classroom setting. The literature overwhelmingly documents the importance of trusted adults in children's lives and argues for the creation and implementation of universal prevention programs that highlight family bonds, especially for families experiencing mental health concerns.

REFERENCE

De Luca, S., Yueqi, Y., Padilla, Y. (2017). A longitudinal examination of how mothers' and fathers' mental health and thoughts of death are related to their child's self-reported levels of parental connectedness. *Children and Youth Services Review* 7.

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