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Depressed dads affect kids' speech development

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Fathers get the baby blues too and, if they do, it can be bad news for their children's language development. Two-year-olds have a smaller vocabulary if their fathers have depression than if their mothers do.



Postnatal depression in women is widely recognised and linked to emotional and behavioural difficulties in their children. Less well known is that some men [also become depressed soon after a child is born](#). To explore the effects of paternal

depression, a team led by paediatric psychologist James Paulson at the Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk surveyed about 5000 families enrolled in the [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study](#), which is backed by the US Department of Education and records symptoms of depression in parents.

When the children were 9 months old, 14 per cent of the mothers and 10 per cent of the fathers were clinically depressed - about twice the rates in the general population. The surprise came when the researchers looked at whether this affected what proportion of 50 common words the children were using at 2 years of age. On average, the kids used 29. But significantly, while postnatal depression had no effect on vocabulary, 9-month-olds with depressed dads went on to use 1.5 fewer words at age 2 than those whose fathers were fine.

Other studies have found that maternal depression can also slow speech development, but Paulson is the first to suggest that paternal depression has the bigger effect.

A likely explanation, says Paulson, is that depression in mothers did not reduce the time they spent reading to their 9-month-old baby, but depressed dads read 9 per cent less often than those who felt fine.

Paulson presented his findings on 6 May at the [annual American Psychiatric Association meeting in Washington DC](#). He hopes they will encourage depressed dads to get treatment. "Men may not be likely to seek help for themselves but when other people who depend on them become affected, that may change the landscape."

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