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How Depression in Mothers Affects Their Children

by Karen Kleinschmidt, Demand Media



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A direct connection exists between maternal depression and a child's behavior. According to Richard O'Connor, psychologist and author of "Undoing Depression: What Therapy Doesn't Teach You and Medication Can't Give You," children react to their mother's depression. They are trying to get their mother to pay attention, set limits and enforce the

rules. They do this by trying to get a rise out of them, but their mothers are so depressed that they often don't react at all or react inappropriately. This starts a cycle of misbehavior in the child. If the depression is not dealt with, the child often continues to act out.

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Babies

According to O'Connor, depressed mothers might have difficulty bonding with their infants. Often, they are less consistent in responding to their infants and less sensitive to their needs than nondepressed mothers are. Sleep and feeding difficulties might develop as well as an inability to be soothed and comforted. Infants of depressed mothers might appear unhappy and isolated. Dr. David Fassler, author of "Help Me, I'm Sad: Recognizing, Treating and Preventing Childhood and Adolescent Depression," states that babies may withdraw, whine or not react at all to outside stimuli and might have difficulty gaining weight if breastfed.

Toddlers/Preschoolers

During the toddler and preschool years, children need consistent limit-setting with a mix of playfulness, patience and affection to thrive. These are the very actions that depressed mothers have difficulty giving. It requires energy to raise a child at this age, which is difficult for mothers who feel inadequate, irritable and drained. A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that preschoolers of depressed mothers had more difficulty problem-solving, cooperating and self-soothing, according to Lori Miller Kase of "Parents Magazine."

Elementary Children

School-age kids of depressed mothers often appear mature for their age. Many have taken over household chores and assumed responsibility of their younger siblings because their mothers aren't functioning as they should. According to Fassler, the look of maturity is a mask for the vulnerability underneath. Behavioral problems are more likely at school because of the lack of discipline at home and academics might suffer because of a lack of motivation and encouragement from their mothers. Social problems might develop for kids this age because they assume negative images of themselves, especially if their depressed mother is critical.

Treatment

Dr. William Beardslee, author of "When a Parent is Depressed: How to Protect Your Children From the Effects of Depression in the Family," says depressed moms can be great parents with the proper support and treatment. Depressed mothers can seek treatment in the form of therapy, medication or both. Support groups might also be helpful. Reach out to your spouse, family and friends for support. If you can, hire a babysitter or other household help. Beardslee emphasizes the importance of discussing depression with your children in an age-appropriate manner. Let them know it isn't their fault and encourage them to ask questions. Let them stick to their routines. It gives them something of their own that gives them a sense of control. Understand your children are resilient and will pull through as you embrace your treatment and feel better yourself.

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About the Author

Karen Kleinschmidt has been writing since 2007. Her short stories and articles have appeared in "Grandma's Choice," "Treasure Box" and "Simple Joy." She has worked with children with ADHD, sensory issues and behavioral problems, as well as adults with chronic mental illness. Kleinschmidt holds a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Montclair State University.

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