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Parents' stress may affect child health

James Randerson, science correspondent
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Stressed, anxious or depressed parents could be making their children unhealthy, according to a study that followed the health of 120 children over three years. Studies in the past have shown how stress can influence a person's own health, but there has been less research on how it can affect the health of others.

In the study Dr Mary Caserta and her team monitored 120 children aged between five and 10 and their parents over three years. Parents were asked to keep a weekly diary of the child's illnesses and to take a temperature measure when they got sick. Every six months the parents completed questionnaires that asked about their own psychiatric health as well as about stressful events and family conflict.

The researchers found a clear link between anxiety and depression among parents and an increased chance of the children being ill and having a high temperature.

The children of parents with more intense psychiatric symptoms also had a more active immune system, as measured by the level of "natural killer" cells and other immune components in their blood. This suggests their immune system was working harder. The research is reported in today's *New Scientist* magazine.

The research helped in "understanding the biological impact of multiple sources of chronic stress in families on specific immune functions in a sample of generally healthy children", the team wrote in the journal *Brain Behaviour and Immunity*.

The research did not find evidence for any impact on the health of children of individual events such as family separation, neighbourhood violence or family injury, or general family conflicts.

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