Father’s Mental Health Predicts Ratings of Child’s Externalizing Behavior, Internizing Behavior, and Dysregulation in Toddlers

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**Background**

- Depressed fathers in post-natal period are more likely to have children with behavioral problems (Ramchandani et al., 2008).
- However, it is unclear what the mechanisms are by which these associations exist. Ramchandani et al. (2008) suggest that behavior problems may be mediated in part through environmental factors such as higher rates of chronic adversity.
- Effects of paternal mental health disorders on children’s development are under-studied (Kane & Garber, 2004) and may be overlooked for the impact they have on the development of their child.
- Further, it is important to investigate whether change in paternal mental health is associated with child behavior problems, as prior studies have suggested that new fathers’ mental health declines across the transition to fatherhood.

**Method**

- 482 pairs of first-time parents were recruited prenatally as a part of an international longitudinal study from hospitals, OBGYN practices, and birth centers in New York, the U.K., and the Netherlands.
- Data were collected from N = 419 families when infants were 14 months.
- Fathers completed measures via an online questionnaire.
- All parents each rated their child's temperament separately using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; 6 items, α = 0.82), the Dimensional Anxiety Scale (DAS; 6 items, α = 0.83), the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS; 42 items), the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; 21 items, α = 0.88), the paranoid subscale of the GHQ (5 items, α = 0.80), and the GHQ (5 items, α = 0.82).
- Parents then rated their child’s temperament separately using the Brief Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (BITSEA).
- Moms’ and dads’ ratings were averaged on each of 5 domains: Competence (11 items, α = 0.82), Externalizing (6 items, α = 0.64), Internalizing (8 items, α = 0.54), Dysregulation (8 items, α = 0.65), Red Flags (14 items, α = 0.62).

**Associations with Mental Health Symptomatology**

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

- Both pre-natal levels and changes in paternal mental health were associated with ratings of child behavior problems.
- In particular, paternal mental health problems were associated with child internalizing, externalizing, and dysregulated behaviors.
- Above and beyond pre-natal levels, increases in reported mental health symptoms throughout the first year of the child's life were associated with child outcomes, such that increases in paternal mental health symptomatology are associated with more internalizing behaviors, dysregulation, and red flag behaviors.
- As well, parents in the UK systematically rated children as having more behavioral problems than did parents in either the Netherlands or the US.
- Findings confirm that further research is needed to examine the relationship and possible mechanisms between father's mental health symptoms and ratings of child's behavior.
- Further research is necessary to better understand the sources of heterogeneity in the changes mental health in the transition to fatherhood.

**References**

- Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.