

SOURCE: Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, July 2007.

When mothers suffer from depression, their children are more likely to develop behavioral problems -- but fathers can prevent this from happening, new research suggests.

In a study that followed a large group of U.S. children over 10 years, researchers found that those whose mothers had depression symptoms were more likely to develop "externalizing" behavior problems, like fighting with their peers.

However, the study found, fathers who were close to their children were able to buffer them against the effects of their mothers' depression.

This means that a father's "active and positive involvement" may help shield his child against the effects of maternal depression, lead study author Dr. Jen Jen Chang of Saint Louis University told Reuters Health.

The findings, published in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, are based on data from a national study that followed 6,552 mother/child pairs from 1992 to 2002. At the start of the study, mothers answered standard questions on depression symptoms; child behavior problems were assessed every two years.

The children also answered questions about their fathers' involvement in their lives, including whether they felt close to their father, whether he talked to them about things that "really matter," and whether he was there for important events in their lives.

Chang's team found that although mothers' depression was related to escalating child behavior problems, this was not the case among children who said their fathers were highly involved in their lives.

None of this negates the importance of treating mothers' depression, as the disorder takes a toll not only on a woman's own health, but her family's well-being as well, Chang said.

However, the researchers say that along with treating a mother's depression, health providers should encourage fathers to stay active in their children's lives.

"When the father readily compensates for the limitations on the depressed mother's functioning," they write, "the child's risk of problem behaviors may be reduced."