

facts on

Caregiver Mental Health and Young Children

Just like everyone else, caregivers can experience mental health concerns. Caregivers' mental health concerns, in their past or present, can impact their young child(ren) in a number of ways. Societal and environmental factors can either lessen or increase the impact of parental mental illness on young children. For example, poverty, unemployment, substance use, parent's history of past childhood abuse; and isolation may increase the impacts; whereas, increased interactions with the health care system may decrease impacts.

Mental illness may be genetic in nature; in other words, it has the potential to "run" in families affecting multiple generations. New theories, called epigenetics, look at the interaction between a person's genes and the environment that he or she is exposed to. It has been found that the environment has an impact on whether certain genes are activated or expressed. The environment during early childhood can mitigate some of the impact of genetically based illnesses, changing the outcome. For example, outcomes for children who live in families where only one caregiver is mentally ill are better than those who live in families with two caregivers who are mentally ill.

What are the impacts on the young child?

- A caregiver experiencing anxiety or depression over a long period of time has been linked to:
 - ❖ More frequent emergency room visits with young children
 - ❖ Decreased visits to family doctors and other medical specialists
 - ❖ Increased risk of chronic illnesses of for the child

- For male caregivers, highly depressive symptoms have been linked to fussy, unpredictable and difficult character traits in their infants.
- For female caregivers, highly depressive symptoms have been linked to sleep disruptions in infants.
- Generally, caregiver mental illness has been linked with:
 - ❖ Lower school readiness
 - ❖ Mental health concerns and criminal activities in adolescence
 - ❖ Separation from caregiver due to hospitalization
 - ❖ Increased risk of exposure to family conflict and domestic violence
 - ❖ Increased caregiving responsibilities, independence, and role reversal at young ages
 - ❖ Misinterpretation of mental illness as something that the child caused
 - ❖ Higher internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children (remain through adolescence and adulthood)
 - ❖ Higher risk of childhood and adult onset mental illness and substance abuse problems
 - ❖ Difficulties forming secure attachments
 - ❖ Difficulty of caregivers with emotional regulation, attention, reading cues and providing social role modeling and, therefore, difficulty teaching this to their children
 - ❖ Normal childhood behaviors exacerbating their caregiver's symptoms

For More Information

Contact:

1319 Colony Street
Saskatoon, SK S7N 2Z1
Bus. 306.651.4300
Fax. 306.651.4301
info@skprevention.ca
www.skprevention.ca

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What can you do?

- Provide practical support to caregivers who are experiencing mental health concerns
- Support and encourage caregivers to take their infants and children for regular check ups
- Support caregivers to maintain contact with their children, including when in the hospital
- Support and encourage caregivers to become involved in their communities
- Provide respite care
- Trusted, safe adults, who are not the immediate caregivers, can develop relationships with the young child and encourage attachment behaviors
- Support an individual's choice to become a parent and try to plan ahead with them regarding the supports they may need
- Provide information and support about parenting to families
- Support caregivers when they talk to their child about their illness

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