



HAL
open science

Is Children’s Mental Illness “a Family Affair”?

Maria Melchior

► **To cite this version:**

Maria Melchior. Is Children’s Mental Illness “a Family Affair”?. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2019, 28 (7), pp.875–876. 10.1007/s00787-019-01366-w . hal-03833322

HAL Id: hal-03833322

<https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03833322v1>

Submitted on 30 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Is children's mental illness "a family affair"?

Maria Melchior¹

Published online: 3 July 2019

© Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2019

"It's a family affair
It's a family affair
It's a family affair
It's a family affair

One child grows up to be
Somebody that just loves to learn
And another child grows up to be
Somebody you'd just love to burn

Mom loves the both of them
You see, it's in the blood
Both kids are good to mom
Blood's thicker than the mud"

Family Affair, Sly and the Family Stone, 1971

Family characteristics, especially parental mental health, are among the strongest and best well-known determinants of emotional and behavioral difficulties in children and adolescents [1–3], including in situations when children are exposed to other sources of adversity [4]. In particular, extensive research shows the impact of maternal depression and substance use—including alcohol use disorder—on the onset and course of offspring externalizing disorders [5] such as ADHD [6, 7], adolescent depression [8] and self-harm [9].

While genetic and epigenetic factors certainly contribute to the intergenerational transmission of mental illness [10, 11], parents' behavior plays an essential role, too. Parents who have mental health problems may lack parenting self-efficacy, which leads to difficulties in finding adequate resources and skills to address the child's needs [8]. For instance, parents who are anxious appear particularly fearful of holding and stroking their baby, which can lead to

insufficient reassurance and contribute to an excess risk of internalizing and externalizing symptoms later in childhood [12]. Parents who have mental health problems also appear at increased risk of hostility towards their children [13], which can be detrimental to their psychosocial development.

This issue of European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry presents original research which broadens the spectrum of thinking in this area in at least three ways. First, a study conducted by Mulraney et al. [13] indicates that offspring outcomes are deteriorated not only in case of severe mental illness but also in case of psychological distress, which is relatively frequent and may go undetected by health professionals. Similarly, the study conducted by Vergunst et al. [14] indicates that maternal symptoms of depression are predictive of offspring trajectories of hyperactivity–impulsivity and inattention through age 17 years. Additionally, the study conducted by Raitasalo et al. [15] shows that prenatal alcohol abuse—even if it is not considered severe—is also predictive of offspring mental and behavioral disorders. This is consistent with other research [5] and suggests that at the population level, a majority of cases of mental illness occur among children who are not in high-risk groups. This finding calls for wide-spectrum efforts to prevent depression at the population level and screen for parental psychological difficulties. For instance, each contact young parents have with the health care system (e.g., during the course of perinatal care and preparation for parenthood, in well-baby clinics, in case of the child's required medical check-ups) should be used as an opportunity to screen for psychological distress and to propose adequate referral if necessary. Second, a systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Lei et al. [16] reports an association between parental body mass index and autism spectrum disorder in the offspring. While the mechanisms underlying this association are yet unclear, the most likely one, and which may additionally contribute to other child mental health problems such as ADHD [17], is excess inflammation prenatally, which may influence neurogenesis. Importantly, only maternal, and not paternal, body mass index seems a source of risk for the offspring, strengthening the biological interpretation of this association. Third, studies in this issue of ECAP consider not only maternal but

✉ Maria Melchior
maria.melchior@inserm.fr

¹ INSERM, Sorbonne Université, Institut Pierre Louis d'Épidémiologie et de Santé Publique, IPLESP, 75012 Paris, France

also paternal mental health and behavior as a possible source of risk. While neither paternal alcohol abuse nor body mass index appears to be related to offspring mental health [13, 16], other research has shown that paternal depression predicts behavioral and emotional problems [18–20], especially in boys [21]. Moreover, paternal parenting style may also be a key risk factor of children's long-term behavioral and emotional difficulties [22]. Hence, it is important to evaluate fathers', as well as mothers', mental health to identify youths at risk of mental health problems and include fathers in efforts aiming to support parents.

The finding that parental mental health difficulties influence children's mental health is not new. However, research published in this month's *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* refines this observation, by showing that (a) this association goes beyond children of persons with severe mental illness and (b) involves the fathers', as well as the mothers', mental health. Moreover, parents' physical weight also appears to influence the risk of child mental health difficulties. Additional research on the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of mental health problems as well as effective ways of limiting the impact of parental psychological difficulties on their children is warranted.

References

- Feder A, Alonso A, Tang M, Liriano W, Warner V, Pilowsky D et al (2009) Children of low-income depressed mothers: psychiatric disorders and social adjustment. *Depress Anxiety* 26(6):513–520
- Stein A, Pearson RM, Goodman SH, Rapa E, Rahman A, McCallum M et al (2014) Effects of perinatal mental disorders on the fetus and child. *Lancet* 384(9956):1800–1819
- Weissman MM, Berry OO, Warner V, Gameroff MJ, Skipper J, Talati A et al (2016) A 30-year study of 3 generations at high risk and low risk for depression. *JAMA Psychiatry* 73(9):970–977
- Erucar S, Maltby J, Vostanis P (2018) Mental health problems of Syrian refugee children: the role of parental factors. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(4):401–409
- van der Waerden J, Galera C, Larroque B, Saurel-Cubizolles M-J, Sutter-Dallay A-L, Melchior M (2015) Trajectories of maternal depression and children's behavior at age five: the EDEN birth cohort study. *J Pediatr* 166(6):1440–1448
- Agha SS, Zammit S, Thapar A, Langley K (2017) Maternal psychopathology and offspring clinical outcome: a four-year follow-up of boys with ADHD. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 26(2):253–262
- O'Connor C, Reulbach U, Gavin B, McNicholas F (2018) A prospective longitudinal investigation of the (dis)continuity of mental health difficulties between mid- to late-childhood and the predictive role of familial factors. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(3):289–300
- Ahun MN, Consoli A, Pingault JB, Falissard B, Battaglia M, Boivin M et al (2018) Maternal depression symptoms and internalizing problems in the offspring: the role of maternal and family factors. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(7):921–932
- Hu N, Li J, Glauert RA, Taylor CL (2017) Influence of exposure to perinatal risk factors and parental mental health related hospital admission on adolescent deliberate self-harm risk. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 26:791–803
- Kim-Cohen J, Moffitt TE, Taylor A, Pawlby SJ, Caspi A (2005) Maternal depression and children's antisocial behavior: nature and nurture effects. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 62(2):173–181
- Monk C, Spicer J, Champagne FA (2012) Linking prenatal maternal adversity to developmental outcomes in infants: the role of epigenetic pathways. *Dev Psychopathol* 24(4):1361–1376
- Pickles A, Sharp H, Hellier J, Hill J (2017) Prenatal anxiety, maternal stroking in infancy, and symptoms of emotional and behavioral disorders at 3.5 years. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 26(3):325–334
- Mulraney M, Giallo R, Efron D, Brown S, Nicholson JM, Sciberas E (2019) Maternal postnatal mental health and offspring symptoms of ADHD at 8–9 years: pathways via parenting behavior. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 54:1038–1046
- Vergunst F, Tremblay RE, Galéra C, Nagin D, Vitaro F, Boivin M et al (2018) Multi-rater developmental trajectories of hyperactivity-impulsivity and inattention symptoms from 1.5 to 17 years: a population-based birth cohort study. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-018-1258-1>
- Raitasalo K, Holmila M, Jääskeläinen M, Santalahti P (2018) The effect of the severity of parental alcohol abuse on mental and behavioural disorders in children. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-018-1253-6>
- Lei XY, Li YJ, Ou JJ, Li YM (2018) Association between parental body mass index and autism spectrum disorder: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-018-1259-0>
- Andersen CH, Thomsen PH, Nohr EA, Lemcke S (2018) Maternal body mass index before pregnancy as a risk factor for ADHD and autism in children. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(2):139–148
- Ramchandani PG, Stein A, O'Connor TG, Heron J, Murray L, Evans J (2008) Depression in men in the postnatal period and later child psychopathology: a population cohort study. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 47(4):390–398
- Kvalevaag AL, Ramchandani P, Hove O, Assmus J, Eberhard-Gran M, Biringer E (2013) Paternal mental health and socioemotional and behavioral development in their children. *Pediatrics* 131(2):e463–e469
- Liskola K, Raaska H, Lapinleimu H, Elovainio M (2018) Parental depressive symptoms as a risk factor for child depressive symptoms; testing the social mediators in internationally adopted children. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(12):1585–1593
- Andreas A, White LO, Sierau S, Perren S, von Klitzing K, Klein AM (2018) Like mother like daughter, like father like son? Intergenerational transmission of internalizing symptoms at early school age: a longitudinal study. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(8):985–995
- Ong MY, Eilander J, Saw SM, Xie Y, Meaney MJ, Broekman BFP (2018) The influence of perceived parenting styles on socioemotional development from pre-puberty into puberty. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 27(1):37–46