

# Mothers' Perception of Father Happiness & Involvement and Symptoms of Postpartum Depression

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## INTRODUCTION

- Thriving, sustainable societies require citizens who are healthy and engaged in civic life. (Center on the Developing Child, 2010)
- Life Course Health Development models suggest that an individual's capacity to be an engaged citizen in adulthood begins early in life. (Center on the Developing Child, 2010; Halfon, Larson, Lu, Son & Bethell, 2017)
- The quality of early environments and experiences exerts a substantial influence on the architecture of a child's developing brain. (Anacker, O'Connell & Meany, 2014)
- Exposure to adversity, such as poverty or parental depression, early in life increases the risk for developing disorders linked to substantial morbidity and mortality (e.g., depression and diabetes). (Center on the Developing Child, 2015)
- The quality of early caregiving relationships may mediate the effects of exposure to early adversity and future negative outcomes. (Wachs, Black & Engle, 2009).
- Postpartum Depression (PPD) compromises a mother's ability to provide nurturing, responsive care for her children. (Center on the Developing Child, 2010)
- Maternal PPD has been linked to poor quality infant-father relationships. (Belanger, 2018; Dennis & Letourneau, 2007)
- Support, particularly from fathers, is linked to a decreased risk for developing symptoms of PPD even among mothers exposed to high levels of stress. (Belanger, 2018; Dennis & Letourneau, 2007)

**Present Study** In this sample of mothers exposed to high levels of stress due to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) hospitalization and ongoing developmental monitoring of their child, we used hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine the influence of mothers' perceptions of fathers' mood and involvement on symptoms of PPD. Mothers rated fathers' happiness at learning of the index pregnancy and involvement in the child's life at the time of study participation. Mothers also completed the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale. (Cox et al., 1987)



## METHOD

**Participants:** 150 mothers of infants/toddlers receiving care in the NICU or attending the NICU Follow-Up Program.

**Table 1.**

Demographics	Percent	N	M	SD
Black/African American	49.3	74		
White	37.3	56		
Other	13.3	20		
First child	47.3	71		
In a relationship	84.0	126		
Income			\$43,500	2.36
Maternal Age			30.06	6.80
Infant Gestational Age (wks)			30.82	4.27
Infant Birth Weight (gms)			1426.51	739.91

**Table 2.**

### Measures and Constructs

#### Outcome Measure

Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale—Seven

#### Construct – Mother reported

Father Pregnancy Happiness Very unhappy—to—very happy

Father Involved Now Not at all—to—very involved

#### Covariates

Maternal History of Depression

Maternal Relationship Status

## RESULTS

In a hierarchical multiple regression analysis with the covariates mothers' personal/familial history of depression and mothers' relationship status at time of study participation entered in step 1 and mother rated father pregnancy happiness and current involvement with the child in step 2, mother rated father pregnancy happiness and child involvement explained 12% of the variance in mothers' symptoms of PPD (see Table 3). Mothers who perceived their child's father as less happy about the pregnancy and less involved now were more likely to experience higher symptoms of PPD.

**Table 3.**

### Mothers' Report of Fathers' Happiness and Involvement

Predictor	B	SEB	β/t	R <sup>2</sup> /ΔR <sup>2</sup>	p
<b>Step 1</b>					
History of Depression	2.174	.80	.21	.095/.095	<.01
Maternal Relationship Status	2.684	1.431	.20		.06
<b>Step 2</b>					
Dad Pregnancy Happiness	-1.044	.37	-.25	.214/.119	<.01
Dad Involvement Now	-1.719	.57	.31		<.01

## CONCLUSIONS

- In this sample of mothers exposed to significant stress associated with their parenting role, mothers' perceptions of father's response to the pregnancy and current parenting engagement was associated with symptoms of PPD.
- This finding is consistent with the findings from Dennis and Letourneau (2007) indicating that support from fathers in the postpartum period plays a key role in maternal mental health.
- As part of a larger study, when mothers in this study were asked "What is helping you the most?", support from their spouse/ partner was the most frequent response. (Belanger, 2018)
- Fathers are also at risk for PPD. Low support for fathers is linked to a significant increase in their risk for developing symptoms of PPD. (Darwin et al., 2017)
- Programs serving parents with infants and young children should recognize that PPD is a family affair. Providing support for mothers and fathers is critical to promoting maternal and family mental health. (Letourneau et al 2012)