



**July 2014:
The Impact of Adult Depression on Young Children**

Background

When you watch a parent play with a child, what makes you smile? Probably it's the way that the mother smiles, the way she reacts to her baby's coos with a laugh and a question or the way the father takes the cheerio his toddler offers him for breakfast. While these seem like tiny moments, sensitive interactions between caregivers and young children are central to their healthy development. For nearly fifty years, Head Start has helped parents understand how to strengthen those interactions and the reasons they're so important.

Yet parents coping with depression tend to have greater difficulty responding sensitively to their children, and parents in poverty are far [more likely than others to be depressed](#). As the New York Times reported last month, regardless of income the mental health of [new mothers](#) can require additional support. Recent research from Temple University has also found that Head Start staff have higher rates of depression than comparable women (see more below). What changes when a caregiver is depressed? She often has less energy to respond to a baby, or he expresses less emotion on his face, or she's unpredictable in her discipline. These behaviors can interfere with a child's healthy development of attachment and emotional understanding, especially during the earliest years when babies are most reliant on their caregivers.

That shouldn't depress you, though! Early Head Start and Head Start, as you'll see in the articles below, are a key opportunity to address families' needs as well as their children's development. In 2012-2013, 120,000 parents got mental health services through their child's Head Start program and by better understanding what the research shows about early learning programs' impact on parental depression, we can continue to improve our services. In addition, resources below address burnout and the secondary trauma Head Start staff may experience when working with struggling families. Thinking globally about how to support the mental health of children, parents, and staff can strengthen programs and ensure everyone who interacts with each child can inspire a smile.

Resources

[Family Well-Being: A Focus on Parental Depression](#)

In this Research to Practice series, the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement addresses parental depression. This resource is aligned with the Head Start Performance Standards and presents research and practical strategies to use in the Head Start and Early Head Start community.

[Fampod: Families Preventing and Overcoming Depression](#)

Dr. William Beardslee, a world-renowned researcher whose work focuses on depression and other related mental health problems and a veteran Head Start supporter, developed this site with information and resources on the prevention of depression in families. It also offers online training modules for the *Family Talk Prevention Intervention*. Registration is free!

[Video: Helping Depressed Low-Income Mothers Give Their Young Children a Good Start](#)

Watch this Urban Institute Forum to see the panel of leaders from organizations including CLASP and Georgetown University discusses maternal depression as a public health issue. Panelists also discuss the problems in providing services to low-income women with depression and emerging opportunities.

[Supporting Healthy Relationships Between Young Children and Their Parents](#)

In this research brief from the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University, Karen Appleyard and Lisa Berlin highlight lessons from attachment theory and research. The brief also provides guidelines for supporting early relationships and practical resources for practitioners and families.

[Secondary Traumatic Stress](#)

Many adults who work directly with families and children experiencing trauma experience high levels of secondary trauma, leading to burnout and exhaustion. Check out this fact sheet on secondary traumatic stress for child-serving professionals from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, as well as a [wealth of resources](#) from the Administration for Children and Families developed for child welfare staff.

[Audio: Relaxation Exercises](#)

These exercises were created by the Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation for use with families and with Head Start staff to reduce stress. Listening to the five minute relaxation breaks can make a difference to both adults and children! The relaxation exercises are recorded in English and Spanish.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
[Maternal Depression Can Undermine the Development of Young Children](#)

This article focuses on the impact that depression in parents and caregivers can have on well-being of children. When children grow up with those around them affected by a mental illness, it can harm the child's brain development. Parents and caregivers suffering from depression may have a difficult time responding sensitively to their child. These small moments make a huge impact in a child's emotional and social development.

Most concerning is the fact that there is a higher prevalence of maternal depression than once believed. Once thought to only be the 'baby blues,' it is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of mothers will experience depression during their lives. Additional stressors, such as poverty, intensify the impact of depression. For instance, the number of mothers affected by depression jumps to 25 percent for low-income families. The authors highlight what research tells us about depression and its impact on children, correcting common misconceptions and presenting policy gaps and implications. Finally they stress the need for continued innovation, evaluation, and improvements for programs that help families affected by depression.

National Institutes of Health

[Testing Maternal Depression and Attachment Style as Moderators of Early Head Start's Effects on Parenting](#)

by Lisa J. Berlin, Leanne Whiteside-Mansell, Lori A. Roggman, Beth L. Green, JoAnn Robinson, and Susan Spieker

Adults with "attachment avoidance" have difficulty forming intimate and close relationships. This study focused on the how mother's attachment avoidance is connected to their supportiveness of their children. The participants were chosen from six sites in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project. The researchers were particularly interested in Early Head Start due to the program's focus on building a close relationship between a mother and her infant. In addition, the home visiting aspect of EHS allows mothers to build a relationship with their home visitor - which helps with social isolation.

Maternal depression, attachment avoidance, and anxiety were first measured and researchers found that mothers with a high attachment avoidance were more difficult to reach as opposed to mothers with low attachment avoidance. In addition, they found that EHS had a more positive impact on mothers with lower initial attachment avoidance and anxiety. The authors make suggestions on how EHS programs can better reach mothers suffering from depression and high avoidance attachment. These suggestions include: screening incoming participants to guide program approach; investing greater resources in mothers experiencing higher avoidance attachment and depression; and screening program providers for attachment avoidance. Overall, this study challenges us to use evidence to inform how we understand and respond to parents' needs.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[The Physical and Mental Health of Head Start Staff: The Pennsylvania Head Start Staff Wellness Survey, 2012](#)

by Robert C. Whitaker, Brandon D. Becker, Allison N. Herman, Rachel A. Gooze

Much attention is given to the children and families that Head Start has served since it was first established in 1965. However, less attention has been focused on the adults that work for Head Start. This study focused on the physical and mental health of women working in Pennsylvania Head Start programs compared to that of US women who have comparable socio-demographic characteristics. The comparisons were made using a 2012 survey of Pennsylvania Head Start staff and 2 national samples of women. The results found that women working at Head Start programs had poorer physical and mental health. These findings are worrisome since Head Start employs a staff of over 200,000, serving over 1 million children and families.

Adults that suffer from additional stressors can have higher instance of depression and they can suffer from higher avoidance attachment (one possible result of the secondary traumatic stress mentioned in the Resources section above). The authors underline the adverse effect that staff well-being can have on the children that they serve. Therefore, they state that improving child outcomes may require more attention on the health and well-being of the Head Start staff - a similar approach found in other professions that place high demands on staff who must be well in order to make a positive impact on those that they serve.

Discussion Questions

1. Given the role that caregiving plays in a child's development, what strategies do you and your program use to help cope with stressors in your lives?
2. Looking back at the article by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, how can you help families cope with depression in their lives? Are there resources in your community to guide families in the right direction?
3. Looking back at the April Research Blast, [Poverty's Effects on Child Development](#), what resources and studies can you use to develop a workshop/discussion with your staff, families, and community on the impact of poverty and depression on the lives of children?

Do you know of other recent research that may be of interest to the Head Start field? Do you have other questions, comments or concerns? E-mail Emmalie Dropkin (edropkin@nhsa.org).