

Play, Parents, and Children's Stress

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Like mother like daughter...unfortunately this may also apply to depression. A study published in an upcoming issue of [*Psychological Science*](#) found that children whose mothers had been depressed at some point and whose parents were hostile when playing with them had higher stress.

Experimenters measured three-year-old children on how upset they became by stressful situations (e.g. a stranger approaching to talk to them, giving them a toy box with keys that don't fit in the lock, or giving them an empty box wrapped up like a present). Half an hour later, the experimenter measured the children's cortisol levels, a stress hormone. Of course, once the stress test was over, the experimenters remedied each situation so the children could relax and have fun. Finally, in another visit, researchers observed various parent-child interactions. They found that children whose parents were hostile with them during play had the largest stress responses. Also, children whose mothers had been depressed at some point during the child's first three years of life were also had higher stress levels.

These findings have important implications because stress is risk factor for depression. This could show one way in which a parent's depression could lead to depression in the child. Although there is a genetic side to depression, psychological scientist Lea Dougherty explains, "if we focus on the parenting, we could really intervene early and help parents with chronic depression when they have kids."

Dougherty, L.R., Klein, D.N., Rose, S., & Laptook, R.S. (2011). [Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis Reactivity in the Preschool-Age Offspring of Depressed Parents: Moderation by Early Parenting](#). *Psychological Science*. doi:10.1177/0956797611404084