

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Impact of Continuous Maternal
Depression on Triadic Interaction between
Parents and their Pre-School Children**

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Abstract

One of the risk factors for child development is a mother's postpartum depression. Most parent-child research focuses on the dyadic mother-child interaction, but there is little research regarding the triadic father-mother-child interaction.

The present study is part of a large-scale longitudinal study which focuses on the effects maternal postpartum depression has on the child's development, specifically pre-elementary school. This study analyzed the effect maternal postpartum depression has on the triadic interaction, mother, father, child, in terms of the child's behavior, meaning, the focus of the game (to his mother, father, both of them or none of them) and measures which examine the co-parenting style. The main hypothesis predicts maternal postpartum depression will affect the child's behavior, wherein the child will prefer self-play or play with one parent; but not with both of them. Also we examined the interaction between gender and focus of game. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that parents in which maternal postpartum depression is present, will show an avoidant, passive and competitive parenting style, as opposed to the control group which will show a supportive parenting style.

This study had 110 families (mother, father, child) participate (23 depressed mother, 87 non depressed mother). The vast majority from a upper-middle class socio-economic level, with parents living together and both parents with higher education. The families were part of a sample which was analyzed during three separate intervals: two days postpartum, six to nine months postpartum and approximately five years postpartum. During each interval the mother was surveyed regarding measures of depression, and during the third interval the triadic interaction was recorded. This specific study examined the child's behavior and measures of the triadic interaction during the third interval of the study, with children ages five to six, before they had

started school. The interaction was analyzed using the Noldus program, a micro-analytic analysis program. The child's behavior was measured by coding the behavior into four categories of focus of the game: with mothers, with fathers, with both of them, and an independent game, meaning, the child played alone. In addition, behaviors were coded into four characteristics typical of parenting styles, for each parent individually: supportive, competitive, passive and avoidant.

This study's findings highlight the importance of the father's presence within the context of maternal postpartum depression, specifically the significant affect the father has on daughters, wherein during interaction the daughters prefer to play with the fathers. These findings support the Compensation Theory of Belsky (Belsky, 1984). These findings show the importance of father involvement in the child's life, how the father can provide a sufficient alternative, and mostly the need and desire the child expresses for said alternative. The unique relationship between fathers and daughters strengthens traditional social theories in which girls are more sensitive than boys, and in turn the parents see themselves as their daughters' protectors.

Research findings which complement and expand on these insights are reflected in the parenting style the mother and father demonstrate towards each other. In continuation with findings which emphasize the unique father-daughter relationship, it's been proven that parents are aware of and understand the importance of said relationship. Therefore, mothers experiencing postpartum depression support father-daughter play, and fathers try not to support interaction between daughters and mothers with postpartum depression. These combined findings come to show the shared understanding parents have in regards to the importance of the father-daughter relationship and the father's ability to protect his daughter from the negative effects of a mother's postpartum depression.

This study's main contribution is the examination of the reciprocal nature of the mother-father relationship, the father-child relationship and the mother-child relationship, all with a background of maternal postpartum depression. This study strengthened previous findings which acknowledged the father's ability to intermediate the depressed mother-child relationship, and his ability to be a compensating figure for the effects of maternal postpartum depression, which comes to fruition in the father-child relationship. Furthermore, the study highlights the unique father-daughter relationship which develops when the mother is experiencing postpartum depression. All these findings were done through a micro-analytic evaluation of the triadic interactions. On a practical level, this study offers an opportunity to evaluate the importance of the long-term ramifications of maternal postpartum depression and the importance the father figure has in the family, beyond the dyadic mother-child relationship. These insights provide building blocks for a new type of treatment within the familial context, which can be more exact and more sensitive to needs, and which can be applied from infancy. Continuing research on this topic should come to these conclusions, yet also expand and further enhance the triadic interaction analysis, and analyze the function of the father-son relationship, all in order to provide broader options for treatment.

