



Center for Early Education and Development

# Questions About Kids

## Can a Mom's Depression Affect Her Baby or Toddler?

Are you concerned about a mother who might be depressed? Are you worried about how her depression might affect her baby or toddler? There is good reason for your concern, but there is also hope. The following information will help you understand the signs of maternal depression, the effect of a mother's depression on her child, and how to help them both.

### What is Maternal Depression?

Maternal depression is depression related to the birth of a child. Symptoms may also occur during pregnancy. There are three types of maternal depression: baby blues, postpartum depression, and postpartum psychosis.

### What are the Baby Blues?

The baby blues are short, yet often intense dips in mood within days of the birth of a baby. It usually happens around the time a mother's milk comes in. The new mother suddenly finds herself teary, sad, or anxious. This is a normal transition caused by hormonal changes and usually lasts a few days. If the mother's symptoms last more than two weeks, she might have a more serious depression illness.

### What is Postpartum Depression?

When a new mother experiences signs of depression for more than two weeks, it is considered postpartum depression. Postpartum depression can happen any time during the first year after the birth of a child. About 1 in 10 new mothers will experience some degree of postpartum depression. A mother experiencing postpartum depression might say or think: "I have so many reasons to be happy, why do I feel so sad?" Another woman might experience intense, angry outbursts, and subsequent feelings of guilt, remorse, and anxiety. Yet another women may seriously doubt her ability to be a good parent. She may have

recurrent fears about the many dangers in the world, and question her ability to protect her innocent baby. Other depression symptoms include lack of interest or pleasure in the people and events that usually bring a woman joy. Noticeable changes in eating, sleeping, level of activity, and the ability to concentrate or make decisions may also occur. A woman may even have recurring thoughts of death. When these symptoms are extreme, it can be very difficult for a woman to care for her baby in a sensitive and nurturing way.

### What is Postpartum Psychosis?

Postpartum psychosis is a very severe form of postpartum depression. A woman with postpartum psychosis has distorted perceptions or thinking. She might hear voices that aren't there or have delusions. Postpartum psychosis requires immediate medical attention. This condition is rare — only one in 1000 women experience these symptoms. However, if left untreated, postpartum psychosis may have tragic consequences for both mother and child.

### How Can this Affect the Young Child?

When a mother is depressed, she may doubt her ability to care for her baby. She may even feel it is hopeless to try to calm her baby when it cries. She may be more impatient and angry than she wants to be, or have a hard time managing her feelings. Seeing the down-turned mouth of a sad or angry mother, her baby may respond by looking away and continuing to fuss. Over time, a mother might think that her baby is fussy or difficult. She might think that she is not capable of comforting her own child. If a mother's severe depression continues, her baby may have difficulty eating or sleeping. They may be difficult to comfort, and may even have delays in development. Toddlers of severely depressed mothers may look depressed or angry, may be anxious, aggressive, clingy, or have difficulty concentrating.



Some depressed mothers, especially with the support of friends and family, are able to adequately meet the needs of their babies. However, this may impact other areas of her life. For example, she may then have less capacity to be patient with older children, or experience unreasonable anger toward her spouse.

## How Can a Mother Get Help for Depression?

The first place to look for help is the mother's medical doctor. Doctors often ask about depression at the baby's six-week checkup. A doctor can help sort out whether symptoms need treatment and, if necessary, provide a referral to a mental health professional. Common treatments for depression include medication, therapy, and support groups.

## How Can Friends and Family Help?

There are several things friends and family can do to support the mother who is experiencing depression:

- Encourage and help her to explore treatment options.
- Encourage her to take the time to care for herself. Suggest getting regular exercise, improving diet and nutrition, spiritual practice such as prayer and meditation, and regular breaks from childcare or other responsibilities.
- Offer to give the mother a break by watching the children, cooking, or doing other household chores.
- When possible, reduce the frequency and intensity of situations known to be difficult.
- Support interactions that are enjoyable for both mother and child. For example, if mother and child enjoy bedtime stories, make sure it happens regularly and that other family members support it.

Here are things family members and friends can do to support the child's healthy development:

- Try to understand what the baby or child is trying to tell you.
- Respond sensitively when the child needs attention.
- Name the child's feelings as they come up. For example, "You are crying so hard, you must be so sad."
- Provide a safe place for the child to explore, as well as a variety of sensory and social experiences.

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- Smile, play, laugh, sing, enjoy! Share positive emotions with the child whenever possible.
- Give the child opportunities to interact with a nondepressed caregiver, such as the mother's partner or other family member.

Research shows that the impact of the mother's depression on her child can be minimized when the illness is identified and treated and when extra care is taken to meet the emotional needs of the child. With the right combination of support, education, and treatment, the mother and child can overcome the depression, and even thrive despite it.

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## For More Information

Mental Health Association of Minnesota:  
<http://mentalhealthmn.nonprofitoffice>

Depression After Delivery, Inc.:  
<http://depressionafterdelivery.com>  
Phone: 1-800-944-4733

QPR Institute: Suicide prevention training and materials.  
<http://qprinstitute.com>

National Institutes of Mental Health (information on teen depression):  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/letstalk.cfm>

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## Questions About Kids is on the Web at: <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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