

Research looks at what's best for babies

Medically treating post-partum depression may not be enough to improve a mother's relationship with her baby, according to a new study done in part by the University of Alberta.

The other essential factor is giving struggling new mothers basic tools to read behavioural cues from their babies and effectively respond to their needs, said Dr. Robert Short, a co-author on the study and professor of educational psychology at the U of A. The pilot study of 11 mild to moderately depressed mothers and their babies showed that when the women were taught how to react to their babies' emotional cues, the infants responded with heightened levels of interest and joy, even though their mothers' depression levels did not change.

"They were able to be positive for their babies despite their own struggles," Short said.

The study, which also included research from the University of New Brunswick, appears in this month's issue of *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

The study used an intervention program called the Keys to Caregiving (KTC) that helps parents understand and respond to infant behaviours, with the goal of increasing positive expressions in the babies. Over five weekly group sessions, the moms and babies were videotaped before and after KTC intervention. The tapes were then scored for the facial emotion expressions of the infants. In one experiment, prior to intervention, 39 per cent of infants displayed interest in their mothers' expressions. Afterwards, it rose to 67 per cent. The babies' expressions of joy rose from 2.8 per cent to 13 per cent.

The interventions consisted of educating the mothers about different infant states (levels of sleeping and waking), behaviours (unique personalities), cues (non-verbal language) and interaction during feedings. The mothers then practiced these new skills during training sessions and at home.

"This gives depressed mothers some sort of structure in terms of what the baby is doing. It doesn't focus on her condition, but on what she can do and how she can better interpret her baby."

As many as 30 per cent of new mothers suffer post-partum depression, which can result in serious growth and developmental problems for infants, Short noted. "What this study shows is that if you focus medically just on the mother's condition, it doesn't necessarily follow that it will improve the type of interactions that are essential for normal healthy child development."

Programs like KTC should apply to all new mothers, he added.

"We assume that mothers have this automatic ability to interact with their babies, and not all of them do," Short noted.

Source: University of Alberta

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