

Maternal Depression and Children's Social-Emotional Development: The Role of Genetic Sensitivity

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Maternal depression predicts problematic child outcomes, yet there is substantial variation in the wellbeing of children of depressed mothers. This paper evaluates whether the association between persistent maternal depression and children's self-reported internalizing and externalizing behaviors in the elementary school years is moderated by children's genetic sensitivity. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of children born between 1998 and 2000. First, I replicate past work showing that the persistence of maternal depression predicts problematic child behaviors. Next, I use several variations from serotonin and dopamine genes to assess whether genetic sensitivity moderates this association. Children with more genetic sensitivity in the serotonergic system report more problem behaviors when experiencing persisting maternal depression than do less sensitive children. This gradient is stronger for boys than for girls.

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