

The Link Between Parent and Child Mental Health in Colorado

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Childhood experiences have a lasting impact on a child's development and can shape health outcomes later in life. A stable relationship with a parent is especially critical during this time. And a parent's own mental health is important for this relationship.

In a first-of-its-kind analysis, the Colorado Health Institute (CHI) used adult and child state survey data from the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment (CDPHE) to measure the relationship between parental mental health and child mental health outcomes. CHI analyzed data on child mental health based on whether a parent had depression, either as a current or previous diagnosis.

Our analysis found that children who have a parent with depression are more than twice as likely as children of a parent with no history of depression to:

- Experience overall poor mental health.
- Need mental health care.
- Receive a mental health diagnoses.

The analysis also found that children who have a parent with depression are less likely to get needed mental health care than children of a parent without depression.

It is important to note that most children of a parent with a depressive diagnosis have good mental health. However, the data show that some of these children struggle more than children without a parent with a depressive diagnosis. Supporting a family's mental health can influence the life-long health of children.

This brief explores these data and offers potential explanations for the findings.

CHI's Analysis

Data are from the 2013 and 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and 2013 and 2014 Child Health Survey (CHS). Two years of data were combined to obtain a sufficient sample. Adults with children between ages one and 14 who answer the BRFSS can opt to be called back to answer the Child Health Survey. The data in this brief link child CHS data with parental BRFSS responses regarding depression diagnosis. Linking was done by CDPHE's Amy Anderson, health data analyst. The CHS sample size of 1,900 records is insufficient for analysis below the state level.





Photos by Brian Clark/ CHI

What the Data Tell Us

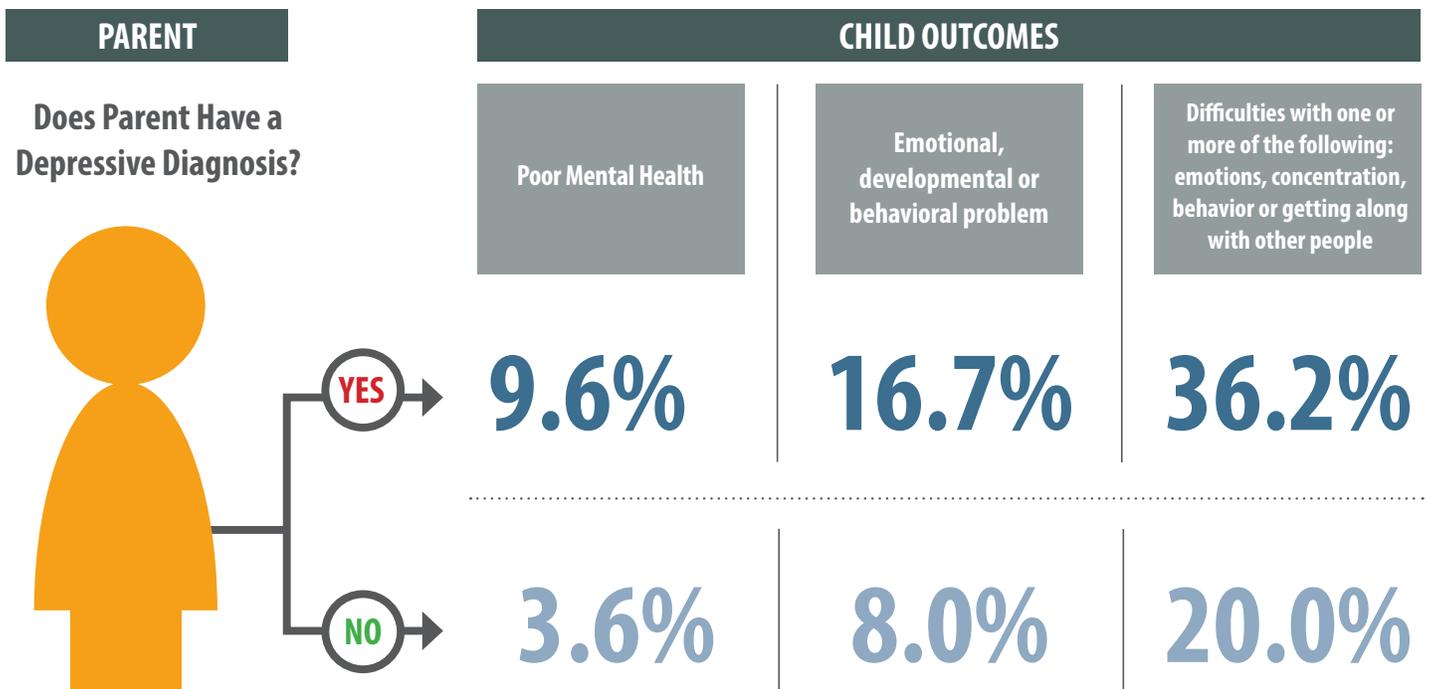
CHI looked at child mental health in three categories: status, diagnoses and access to mental health care.

1. MENTAL HEALTH STATUS

Nearly one of 10 (9.6 percent) Colorado children of a parent with depression experience poor mental health. This rate is nearly three times that of children who do not have a parent with depression.

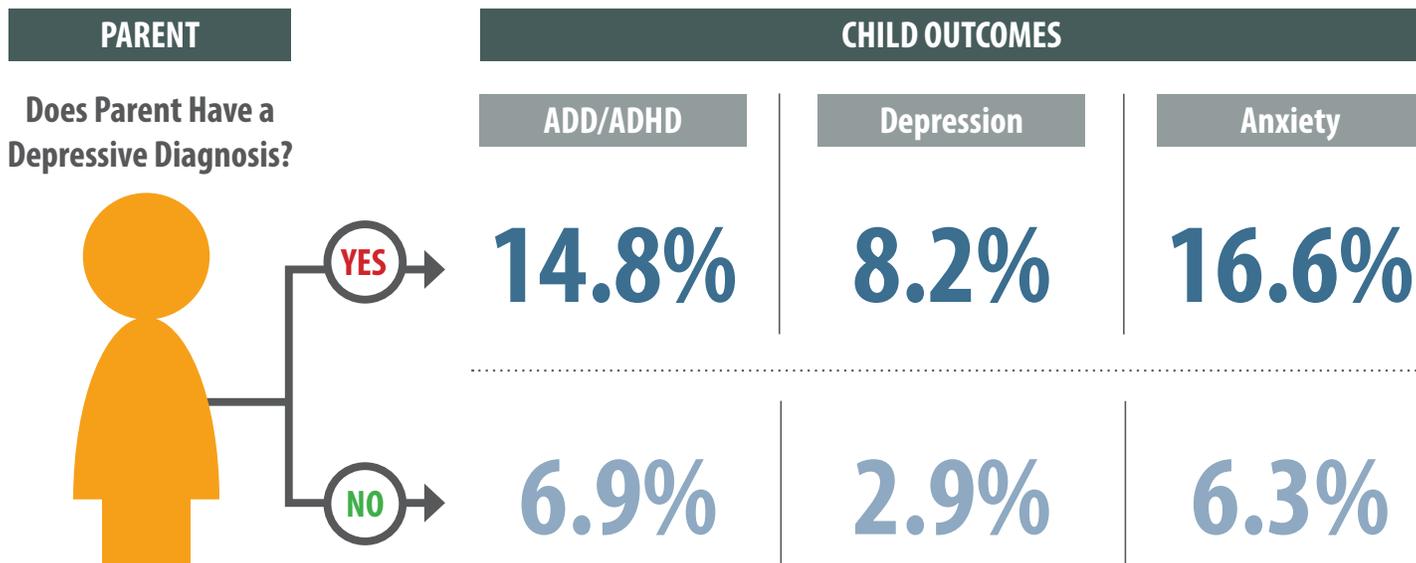
Two other indicators of mental health status show similar trends.

One of five (20.0 percent) children who do not have a parent who is depressed has difficulties with emotions, concentration, behavior or being able to get along with other people. For children of a parent with depression, the rate is more than one of three (36.2 percent). And these children are more than twice as likely to have emotional, developmental or behavioral problems for which they needed treatment or counseling.



2. MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSES

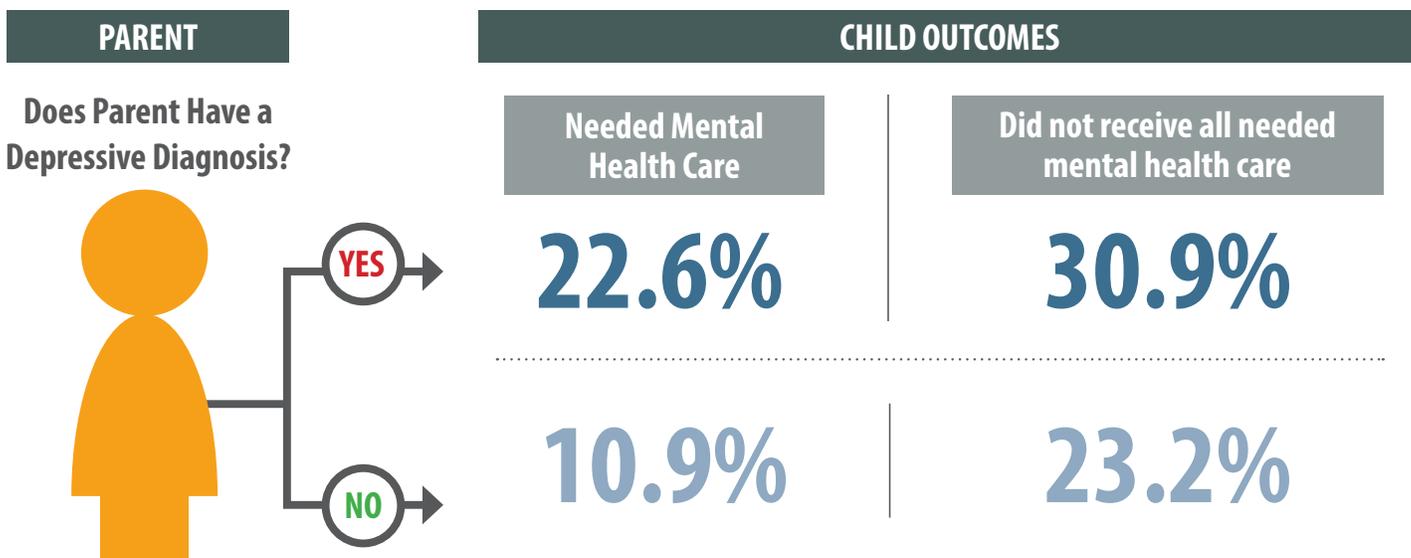
Children of a parent with depression are more likely to have received a mental health diagnosis than children whose parent does not have depression. Nearly 15 percent are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) compared with 6.9 percent of children without a parent who has a history of depression. Children of a parent diagnosed with depression are nearly three times as likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety as children who do not have a depressed parent.



3. ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Children of a parent diagnosed as depressed are more likely to need care than children without a parent with depression, but they are less likely to get it.

About 23 percent of children of parents with depression need mental health care compared with one of 10 (10.9 percent) children whose parent is not depressed. And about one third (30.9 percent) of children in the depressed parent group did not get the care they needed.



Possible Explanations for the Link

Not all children of a parent with depression struggle with their mental health. In fact, the data find that most of these children — more than 90 percent — are mentally healthy.

However, depression can impact the way parents interact with their child. The parent or parents may not be able to do the things they want to do with their son or daughter or provide a nurturing environment.¹ Environmental issues that impact a parent's mental health, such as an unsafe neighborhood or financial worries, also impact children.

The stigma surrounding mental health comes into play as well. Parents who are willing to talk about depression are probably more willing to discuss any mental health challenges faced by their children. For others, the stigma of a mental health diagnosis may discourage such a discussion.

The data in this analysis are self-reported. Survey respondents were asked about their history of depression and their perception of their child's mental health needs. As with any self-reported data, there is room for reporting and recall bias.

Policy Implications

Efforts are underway to address the health of Colorado parents and their children. Here are some highlights.

Early detection of pregnancy-related depression can minimize negative impacts on children. Colorado's advocacy community wants to increase Medicaid coverage for maternal depression screens from one to three per year and will bring the issue to the 2017 legislature. On the intervention side, programs such as the Nurse Family Partnership continue to support women across the state as they adjust to new motherhood.



Policies that support the mental health of both a parent and their child show promise to improve outcomes for both generations. The two-generation approach meets the needs of children and their parents at the same time, treating the entire family as one patient.

Some communities are adopting this model. One example is the Jeffco (Jefferson County) Prosperity Project, which pairs families enrolled in Head Start with community navigators, who help connect with services, including mental health, for both parents and kids.²

The Colorado Department of Human Services is exploring options to incorporate a two-generation approach at both the county and state levels.

Endnotes

¹ http://www.childtrends.org/indicators/parental-depression/#_ednref1

² <http://www.jeffcoschoolsfoundation.org/jeffco-prosperity-project.html>

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