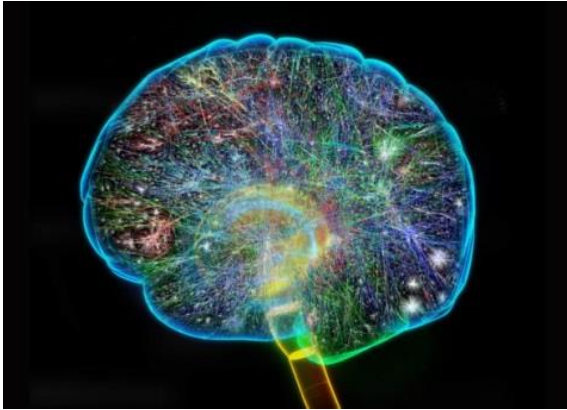


# No Person is an Island: Kids Affect Moms and Moms Affect Kids' Moods

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Screaming, crying, stomping feet... Irritability in children can be a big problem. But what if the mother is depressed? Things can get even harder for families. Recent research from TEND Lab at San Diego State University suggests that child irritability may be affected by maternal depression and vice versa, in a feedback loop as kids develop.

## What is Depression?

*Depression is a mood disorder where the affected individual feels a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities. Such symptoms include but are not limited to: significant weight gain/loss, change in sleeping pattern, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, inability to concentrate, and thoughts of suicide/death. To be diagnosed with depression, the affected individual must display at least five symptoms for at least two weeks, and significant enough to affect impairment in important aspects of life.*

Researchers from San Diego State University's TEND Lab and the National Institute of Mental Health examined children and mothers from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study. Follow up interviews were conducted with the children's mother over time at the children's ages 1 year, 3 years, 5 years, and 9 years to assess the mother's depression and child's irritability.

*Anger and irritability are the most common reasons parents consult mental health professionals.*

The researchers found that over time, maternal depression increased child irritability levels, and in turn child irritability levels increased the likelihood of maternal depression. Most prior studies in psychology have focused on

parents' influence on kids only, but this study showed that the influence is bidirectional. In fact, children with more severe irritability were 4x more likely to have mothers with recurrent depression than children with low irritability. This study also showed that mothers' influence on children and vice versa was strongest earliest in childhood, but eventually decreased by ages 5 to 9. It is important to bring to attention that children typically begin to attend school at this time, thus resulting in a decrease in time spent with their mother as well as having other external influences on their development.

### **What Can We Learn From This?**

These results give important insight on the bidirectional relationship between a mother's mental health and a child's irritability level. It suggests that if we want to decrease children's irritability symptoms, we need to pay attention to whether the mother has depression and potentially treat her simultaneously with the child. This research also shows that helping parents and children while the kids are still very young, and parents can have the most influence over the child, is very important.

