

Dad's Mental Health Tempers Ill Mom's Effect

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT
San Francisco Bureau

SAN FRANCISCO — Good mental health in a father can buffer the impact of a mentally ill mother on a child, Robert S. Kahn, M.D., said at the annual meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies.

In a study of 822 children aged 3-12 years who were living with both parents, the presence of mentally healthy fathers mitigated the effects of mothers' mental illness on emotional and behavioral problems in their children. Mental illness in fathers did not affect children much if the mother was mentally healthy, said Dr. Kahn of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center at the meeting, sponsored by the American Pediatric Society, the Society for Pediatric Research, and the Ambulatory Pediatric Association.

The secondary analysis of cross-sectional data from a longitudinal survey of families included parental mental health assessments using the K10, a new, validated 10-item screen for serious mental illness, including mood or anxiety disorders. Children were assessed through the use of two scales: the Behavior Problem Index (BPI) Externalizing scale for prob-

lems such as impulsiveness, disobedience, and lying and the BPI Internalizing scale for problems such as depression, anxiety, and fearfulness.

Higher maternal scores on the K10 (indicating greater mental illness) were associated with increased child scores on the BPI scales (indicating greater behavioral and emotional problems). The highest BPI scores were seen in children whose parents both were mentally ill. Child scores on the BPI scales were lower but

still elevated if the mother, but not the father, had mental illness.

Compared with families in which both parents were mentally healthy, having both parents score in the highest quartile on the K10 screen added 5 points to the child's BPI Externalizing score and 3 points to the BPI Internalizing score.

If only the mother scored in the highest quartile on the K10, this added 2 points to the child's BPI Externalizing score and 1 point to the Internalizing score. If only

the father scored in the highest quartile on the K10, this added less than 1 point to the child's score on either BPI scale.

If both parents were mentally ill, 9% of children scored in the top 10th percentile on the BPI Externalizing scale and 8% were in the top 10th percentile on the Internalizing scale.

If only the mom was mentally ill, 2% and 3% of children scored in the top 10th percentile on the Externalizing and Internalizing scales. ■

Romantic Woes May Hit Teen Boys Harder

BALTIMORE — There may be a link between romantic relationship anxiety and depression, and surprisingly, this association appears stronger in teenage boys than girls, Carl Weems, Ph.D., wrote in a poster presentation at a biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence in Baltimore.

Dr. Weems and coinvestigator Natalie Costa used two scales, the Experience in Close Relationships test and the Depression Symptom Checklist-90, to measure relationship anxiety and depression in 189 adolescents.

Participants were aged 13-19 years (mean age, 15 years), and 66% were female. Sixty-one percent were Hispanic, 27% were African American, and 12% were of other races.

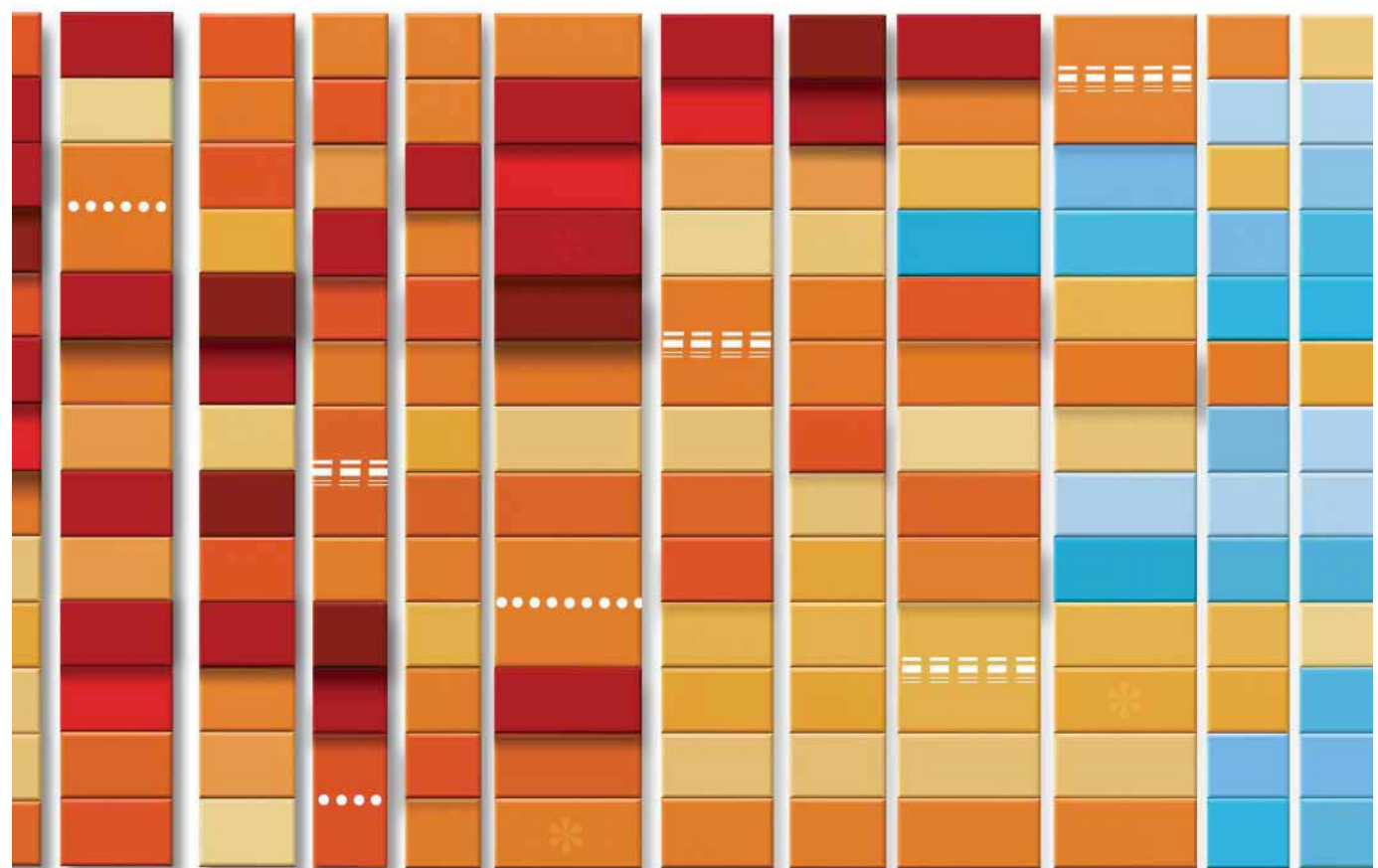
The results showed that relationship anxiety was significantly associated with depression but was less strongly tied to depression in girls and more strongly linked to depression in boys.

Both genders had comparable relationship anxiety scores.

"A possible explanation is that it is more normative and accepted for girls to have relationship anxiety, whereas it is less normative and accepted for boys. When boys experience relationship anxiety, it may be more salient and more related to psychopathological symptoms," Dr. Weems wrote.

Longitudinal research could establish whether relationship anxiety precedes depression, or vice versa.

—Deeanna Franklin



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