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THE IMPACT OF PATERNAL DEPRESSION IN INFANCY: A MECHANISM FOR THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF RISK

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The adverse influence of parental psychopathology on child development has been the focus of intense research in recent years, yet we are only beginning to understand the factors that explain this intergenerational transmission. Depressive symptoms in fathers have received relatively little attention when compared to research on the impact of maternal depression on children's emotional and behavioural problems. Recent evidence suggests that paternal depressive symptoms in the postnatal period are associated with an increased risk of toddler behaviour problems, which persist in clinical significance into childhood. This research examines a model of 'social-environmental transmission' of paternal psychopathology. We compared patterns of parent-infant interactions among families with depressed and non-depressed fathers to address the following question: Are the early interactions of depressed fathers characterised by maladaptive affect, behaviour and cognitions? This study is part of an on-going longitudinal investigation, The Oxford Fathers Project (OFP) of families who are followed when infants are 3 months to 2 years of age. Paternal behaviours, including verbal comments and interactive behaviour were examined during free-play with their 3-month old infants. Father's behaviour was coded from Fiori-Cowley and Murray's (1996) Global Rating Scale and verbal transcripts were examined for cognitive and mentalizing statements.

Preliminary results suggest a higher proportion of infant directed negativity, in the verbal content of depressed fathers. Further analysis will be conducted and presented at the meeting. Discussion emphasises the importance of dysfunctional communication patterns in father-infant interactions that provide important clinical hypotheses as well as targets for identification and early intervention.