

Genetic sensitivity to social environment:
Serotonin genes moderate the relationship of persistent maternal
depression and child behavior

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Abstract:

Maternal depression is associated with children's future wellbeing. It is important to understand through which mechanisms this relationship comes about and whether it holds for different kinds of children and varied outcomes. This article evaluates the association between maternal depression and children's self-reported internalizing and externalizing behaviors in middle childhood. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of children born in large American cities between 1998 and 2000. First, I evaluate how the persistence of maternal depression in early and middle childhood predicts problematic child behaviors. I also show that maternal depression matters more for the development of boys than for girls. Finally, using several genetic polymorphisms I demonstrate that biological factors moderate children's responses to parental depression. Overall, this study shows that persistent maternal depression influences the behavior of boys with a genetic disposition to be more sensitive to their environment; these boys have higher levels of problem behaviors when their mothers are depressed but lower levels of problem behaviors when their mothers are not depressed.