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How domestic abuse can scar an unborn child for life

By [David Derbyshire](#)

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Legacy: Pregnant women exposed to great stress may affect their babies later in life

High levels of stress during pregnancy can cause an unborn child to have lifelong mental scars, according to researchers.

They believe a mother facing unnecessary crises can leave an imprint in the brains of her children, making them less able to cope as they get older.

The study team asked 25 mothers whether they had suffered extreme stress caused by abuse from boyfriends or husbands while they were pregnant, and then rated their emotional level. They then monitored the behaviour of a particular gene in their children, who were aged nine to 19.

The gene – called the glucocorticoid receptor – is involved in the brain's response to stress.

The German researchers found that the gene was far less active in children whose mothers were victims of domestic abuse when they were pregnant. Abuse after pregnancy did not appear to affect the way the gene responded in the brains of their children.

Helen Gunter, of the University of Konstanz, said: 'It changes the way that people respond to stress and they may have a reduced ability to respond to stress.'

'Past studies have shown that children who have abused parents are more prone to depression later in life.' Dr Gunter, who reported the findings in the journal *Translational Psychiatry*, said the study looked only at the extreme stress caused by partner violence.

'We did not look at the everyday stresses of working or having a family,' she added.

LITTLE MOUTHS 'NEED HOME-COOKED FOOD'

PARENTS should give their babies home-cooked, fresh food, according to an extensive study.

Early exposure to good food helps children develop healthy taste buds and makes them less likely to crave fatty, sugary meals, researchers found. Infants weaned on bottles, cans and packets were less likely to eat fruit and vegetables when older. The conclusions were reached by researchers from De Montfort University in Leicester, and the universities of Bristol and Bir-

mingham, who analysed data from 7,866 mothers of children born in 1991 and 1992.

Writing in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*, they said: 'The findings support the concept that exposure to fruit and vegetables is important in the early weaning period.'

De Montfort's Helen Coulthard said children's diets were a cause for concern. She added: 'They do not seem to be eating the amounts of fruit and vegetables recommended for health.'

'This study is very specific to abuse.' The researchers stressed that the study relied on the mother's memories of abuse after a decade or two. And it doesn't prove for certain that violence towards pregnant women causes the changes in a child's brain – just that there is a link.

Dr Carmine Pariante, of the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College London, said: 'This paper confirms that the early foundation years start at minus nine months. We have known for some time that maternal stress and depression during pregnancy induce a unique response in the offspring, by affecting children's behaviour well into adolescence and children's ability to modulate their own stress response.'

'This study shows that the glucocorticoid receptor, that is, the receptor for stress hormones, is subject to a key biological change that contributes to the organisation of this offspring response.'

'This confirms that pregnancy is uniquely sensitive to a challenging maternal psychosocial environment – much more than, for example, after the baby is born.'

'As we and others have been advocating, addressing maternal stress and depression in pregnancy is a clinically and socially important strategy.'

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I agree with KL, London. This research is not playing the 'blame game'. They have had to narrow the research field to get a more of an accurate result of how severe stress during pregnancy affects children. ALSO, it's not 'fake feminist advocacy "studies have shown, so-called research" - Chris from Wokingham..(or should I say Man with a bit of a hang-up!) as if men could get pregnant, i'm sure there would have been many men in the study. :) I have never been physically abused but in both pregnancies suffered severe amounts of emotional abuse and have had two children that are completely different in personality but both have special needs and are very anxious. This is also not a ploy to put more pregnant women on anti-depressants. Hopefully, this evidence will encourage pregnant women in dangerous situations, both physically and emotionally to get themselves to a safe place for the sake of their unborn child.

- Karyn, Frimley, Surrey, 20/7/2011 14:34

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Helen Grieve, you should think yourself lucky if being told you might have to have a c-section was the only thing that caused you "extreme stress" during your pregnancy!! I was physically, emotionally, financially, and sexually abused by my partner right from the beginning of my pregnancy. He was a violent drunk who frequently spent our mortgage and food money on booze. I was extremely stressed for the whole pregnancy and worried about the safety of my baby, the safety of myself, whether our home was going to be repossessed, whether my partner was going to kill us all, where I could run to etc etc. My son is now a

teenager and is one of the most highly strung, anxious and hypersensitive people I have ever met. When he was much younger I took him to see an osteopath who took one look at him and asked whether I had been a victim of domestic violence whilst I was pregnant with him. Oh how I wish my biggest worry back then was whether I would have to have a fairly routine op or not!

- Andrea, Oxford, 20/7/2011 13:48

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I SUPPOSE IT MIGHT HELP - to keep stating the blindingly obvious!! :O

- Mrs VS Chichester, just my opinion, 20/7/2011 12:13

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Blimey you'll be telling us that calm babies are born to calm parents next.....

- GG, Of the SouthEast, 20/7/2011 12:03

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In traditional Chinese medicine it was usual practice for the pregnant woman to listen to uplifting music, play music, paint, take walks in nature, beautify the house etc, as the Chinese believed that if the woman was happy then it would lead to the good health of the baby...and 3000 years later we are only just finding this out...how smart is this western culture supposed to be?

- Mike, Australia, 20/7/2011 11:24

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I don't care for all the huge words they use but it just does not feel right to have massive verbal arguments when you are pregnant. It causes a lot of stress and I feel this passes on to the baby. And can't they hear you screaming as well? Just not good I don't think

- Wendy , London, 20/7/2011 11:11

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