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WSU study will expand research on role of fathers in infant mental health

A groundbreaking new study dubbed "Baby on Board" from Wayne State's School of Social Work and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development (MPSI) will examine the biological and behavioral processes that parents experience as they prepare to care for a new baby.

The study was designed to address the paucity of research on how fathers interact with newborns and influence the mental health of infants, said Carolyn Dayton, the study's designer and clinical investigator. Dayton, who is an assistant social work professor and associate director of MPSI's Infant Mental Health Program, said the study should lead to the development of interventions to support fathers, particularly those who are economically or socially disadvantaged.

Dayton is recruiting participants for the study, specifically couples older than 18 who are expecting a child. Both parents must participate in two study sessions: the first during the pregnancy and the second when their baby is four months old. During the first session, parents will be asked to share their thoughts and feelings about raising their new baby, with a particular focus on how they plan to cope with stress. Researchers will also conduct extensive data on mental health, family history, experience with child abuse or domestic violence, spirituality and other risk and resilience factors, as well collect biological measurements of stress. Parents will then participate in a series of simulations involving baby cries that will allow researchers to measure indicators of stress response. At four months, researchers will observe how parents interact with their babies to see potential differences in how mothers and fathers soothe their infants or otherwise help them regulate their emotions.

Dayton, who has done extensive research on domestic violence and infant mental health, said the research on early parenting interventions has traditionally relied on mothers' accounts of fathers' interaction with babies, which means existing early parenting interventions derived from the research may be heavily skewed toward mothers' parenting tendencies and strengths.

"It may or may not be true that early interventions that work with moms don't work with dads, but we need direct involvement from fathers in our studies to determine that," Dayton said. "This study will help inform more tailored interventions by asking dads: What gets in your way when you parent? What do you find supportive? What would you find helpful?"

The "Baby on Board" study is supported through funds from the WSU School of Social Work, MPSI, and a grant from the Lois and Samuel Silberman Fund. Participants will be compensated up to \$180 each for their time. Expectant parents 18 years and older interested in participating can call 313-664-2629 or send an email to babyonboard@wayne.edu for enrollment eligibility.

WSU IRB# 023413B3F

Clinical Investigator: Carolyn Dayton, Ph.D.

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