

Children of pregnant smokers likely to be aggressive: Study

BY AARON DERFEL JANUARY 6, 2009



Tobacco use during pregnancy has already been associated with a long list of harmful effects, including low birth weight, still births, sudden infant death syndrome and behavioural problems in children.

Photograph by : Marwan Naamani/AFP/Getty Images

MONTREAL — Women who smoke during pregnancy give birth to children who are at a much higher risk of becoming physically aggressive, a study by Quebec and Dutch researchers has found.

Tobacco use during pregnancy has already been associated with a long list of harmful effects, including low birth weight, still births, sudden infant death syndrome and behavioural problems in children.

And now one can add to the list physical aggression, characterized by children who are quick to hit, bite, kick, fight and bully others.

"What's new about this study is that we can pick up the link (between smoking and physical aggression) in children as early as 17 to 42 months of age," said Universite de Montreal researcher Jean Seguin, one of the lead researchers.

Seguin and his colleagues examined the behaviour of 1,745 children who are part of a long-term research project called the Quebec longitudinal study.

They found that the children of mothers who smoked at least 10 cigarettes a day ran a risk of high physical aggression that was about 30 per cent greater than the offspring of mothers who did not light up during pregnancy.

And the children of mothers who smoked heavily and who also had a serious history of anti-social behaviour ran a risk that was about 200 per cent greater than the offspring of women who did not smoke and had no anti-social history.

"Regardless of anti-social behaviour by the mother, smoking during pregnancy will increase the risk for physical aggression in the children," Seguin explained. "What we're saying is that the risk is stronger in the mothers who have anti-social behaviour and in families who come from a lower income."

Physical aggression is present in most young children, but it decreases with age as they learn language and develop cognitive skills. However, those who exhibit the highest levels of aggression early on are at the greatest risk of chronic physical aggression throughout childhood, the study noted.

Seguin estimated that about 25 per cent of Quebec women still smoke during pregnancy, much higher than other parts of the world.

The study was published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*. Researchers from McGill University and Leiden University also took part.

Previous studies by other researchers have shown that women who stop smoking while pregnant tend to have happier and more adaptable babies.

A 1999 Australian study revealed that up to 25 per cent of child behaviour problems can be attributed to women smoking in early pregnancy.

© Copyright (c) Canwest News Service