



Incubator time may cut depression risk, study finds

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Maternity ward incubators may be warming up a baby's later outlook on life as well as its tiny body, a University of Montreal study suggests.

In findings that shocked researchers, the study of 1,212 children followed through to adulthood found that babies who needed incubator time as newborns were two to three times less likely to be depressed when they grew up.

"We were so surprised when we saw the results, we were not expecting them at all," says Dr. David Gourion, the lead study author.

"It was completely exciting because it was completely in the opposite direction of our main hypothesis," says Gourion, who worked at the Montreal school when the study was conducted.

The study, published this week in the journal *Psychiatry Research*, looked at a larger study of Quebec kindergarten children launched in 1986 that took information on their birth circumstances.

It found that infants who had needed an incubator stint were far less likely to suffer clinical depression when assessed at 15 and 21 years of age.

Some 16.5 per cent of study subjects had been placed in incubators as babies. Only five per cent of these infants later developed depression, compared to nine per cent of those who hadn't needed the devices.

The results were completely counterintuitive, says Gourion.

"It was completely opposite of our original hypothesis, which was that early separation from the mother would increase the risk of developing depression later in life," he says. "In fact, the relation was opposite. It was really special."

Gourion, who now practises at the Hospital Sainte-Anne in Paris, says the comfort gained for baby from early bonding with its mother was expected to increase psychological stability later in life.

While the study offered no theories about why the incubator babies had the actual advantage, researchers posed several different theories.

"I think it's not due to a single factor, I think it could be mediated by several complex things," Gourion says.

For one, Gourion says, the parent of babies who need incubators, having gone through the trauma of having a sick infant, may be more attentive to that child in coming years.

"It can modify the nature of the relationship between the mother and the child...later during the childhood. Maybe she would be more attentive, as may the father."

As well, the warm climate and oxygen-controlled environment in an incubator may itself offer a calm beginning to a baby's life, Gourion says.

While he says that more studies need to be done, Gourion adds that the results were robust and that many factors that could have skewed the results - socio-economic circumstances and newborn weight, for example - were controlled for in the results.

The study, he says, may provide insights into the early life factors that may lead to depression down the road.