In Germany, a significant number of children are growing up with a mentally ill parent. For parental depression alone, the estimated number of affected children is 500,000. Growing up with a mentally ill parent can be regarded as a risk factor regarding the healthy development of children. In comparison to children living with “healthy” parents, affected children show emotional and behavioral problems more often, as well as manifest mental disorders. However, growing up with a mentally ill parent is not necessarily associated with an impairment of children’s mental health. In fact, about two-thirds of the affected children do not develop persistent impairments. This indicates that the majority of affected children or families possess the resources and abilities necessary to cope with the challenges associated with parental mental illness. But why do children of mentally ill parents carry a higher risk of developing a mental illness on their own? Firstly, it is assumed that there is a vulnerability to develop a mental illness on a genetic level, which is passed on to the next generation. Secondly, explanations are based on differences in parenting behavior of the mentally ill parent as well as the experience of critical life events. In general, however, a combination of both factors is accepted (so-called gene-by-environment-interaction).

This master thesis, rooted in the field of educational science, explores the relationship between parental feelings, behavior and perceived stress and the perceived stress of children. The thesis is based on findings suggesting that the interaction between mentally ill parents and their children is impaired, sometimes even severely. For example, mentally ill parents show less parental responsiveness, the interaction between affected parents and their children can be disapproving and rejecting, and negligence and maltreatment occur more often in affected families (Plass/Wiegand-Greffe 2012, pp. 38; Mattejat/Remschmidt 2008, pp. 414).

A sample of 91 parent-child pairs was examined to identify factors which are linked to the perceived stress levels of children. The analysis used data from a questionnaire study that evaluated the KANU-project (a primary preventive intervention program directed at families with a mentally ill parent; 2008-2012).

The quantitative analysis showed that different aspects of the perceived stress level of children are associated with a broad range of factors. For example, the extent of social inclusion of children in schools can be explained by the severity of parental depression and the quantity of parental episodes of illness (23% of the variance). In contrast, the self-worth reported by the children depends primarily on the frequency of parental punishments rather than on the severity of the disease. In addition, the extent of caring parenting behavior reported by the children is not affected by the severity of the disease, but by the socioeconomic status (income and graduation level) as well as the relationship status of the affected parent.

In conclusion, no general, universal relationship between the severity of parental illness and the perceived stress levels of affected children could be found. Thus, it seems that the severity of illness alone does not determine the degree of stress of the affected children. Instead, there seems to be a rather complex interplay between children’s psychological stress on the one side and the type and severity of the parental illness, the socioeconomic status, the constellation within the family as well as the parenting behavior on the other side.

We are looking forward to informing you about science and research in the future.

You can find detailed information about us using the following web address: www.uni-bielefeld.de/zpi/

Feel free to contact us via e-mail zpi@uni-bielefeld.de