



EARLY DEVELOPMENT INSTRUMENT

Equity from the Start



## How does a parent's chronic illness impact their child?

🕒 April 24, 2019   📁 Latest Reports   📍 AEDC, Australia, cancer, child development, chronic illness, Early Development Instrument, EDI, illness, parents   👤 Matt Horner

Chronic physical illnesses are complex, lengthy, and difficult to treat. People dealing with this type of illness often experience impaired physical and social functioning, as well as reduced well-being. Because of these issues, the impact of a physical illness often reaches beyond an individual to his or her immediate family.

Raising children at the best of times is stressful. Doing so while managing an illness is even harder. Knowing how to better support children of a parent with a chronic illness can help reduce the burden chronically ill parents face.

---

### Research Summary

- Daughters of chronically ill mothers had increased odds of worse physical, social, emotional, and communicative health.
- Sons of chronically ill mothers had increased odds of language and cognitive difficulties.
- There was no association between fathers' chronic illness and children's developmental health.

---

### What is the research about?

Most of what is currently known about how a parent's chronic illness affects their children is based on adolescents. In this age group having a parent with a chronic illness increases the risk of poor social and behavioural functioning, academic underachievement, and higher rates of internalizing and externalizing problems. Research on younger children has provided mixed results.

A group of [researchers from the University of Western Australia](#) used data from the [Australian Early Development Census \(AEDC\)](#) to look at how a parent's chronic illness influences a child's early development.

---

### What did the researchers do?

A sample of 19,071 kindergarten children from Western Australia had their AEDC data linked with their parents' health records.

Parents were identified as having a chronic illness if they had at least one chronic illness diagnosis from any time 12 months prior to the child's birth to the final year of AEDC collection used in the study.

The researchers took into account child, parent, and community characteristics associated with child development to try and focus on the role of chronic illness on children's development.

---

### **What did the researchers find?**

Over 7% of mothers in the study were diagnosed with a chronic illness, with cancer being the most common diagnosis, followed by respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. A similar percentage of fathers had a chronic illness, although the most common diagnoses was musculoskeletal disorders, followed by cancer, and cardiovascular disease.

Daughters of chronically ill mothers had a higher risk of physical, social, and communication difficulties. Sons of chronically ill mothers had higher risk of language and cognitive difficulties. The risk level increased with each additional year of exposure to maternal chronic illness.

There was no association between fathers' chronic illness and children's developmental outcomes. The authors explained this may be because mothers are more likely to be the primary caregivers, meaning their illness would impact the family more.

---

### **What does this research mean?**

A mother's health should be considered when supporting children's early development, and treatment of chronic illness should consider the broader impacts on the patient's family. Healthcare services have an important role to play in linking families into appropriate family-centred services to best support the needs of chronically ill mothers.