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Maternal Depression and its Impact on Young Children: Strategies for Prevention and Methods for Establishing an Evidence-Base Influence Policy

SUZANNE THEBERGE: Hello everyone. My name is Suzanne Theberge. I'm the project coordinator for Project Thrive at the National Center for Children in Poverty and I'm going to begin the session with a brief overview of maternal depression and its impact on early child development.

What is depression? Depression is a combination of symptoms that interferes with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat and enjoy other--one's pleasurable activities. Symptoms can lead to long-term health problems and an increased need for health services as well as difficulty with employment. Women may be depressed generally or in relation to child bearing.

Perinatal depression is depression in women related to child bearing. It includes prenatal depression, postpartum blues, postpartum depression and postpartum psychosis. The most common is postpartum blues, which occur in up to 80% of

all mothers, but we're going to be speaking about postpartum depression which lasts longer than postpartum blues and tends to be more serious.

After childbirth, depression is the second major reason for hospitalization for women in the U.S. So as you can see, it's a very serious issue. There are a variety of factors that contribute to depression. For many it's a hereditary disorder. Social risks and conditions also contribute. In low income women in particular depression is a response to multiple adversities.

Four or more risk factors, which I'll present on the next slide, correlate with the greatest level of risk. Among low income women and women of color maternal depression is often comorbid with trauma, posttraumatic stress, anxiety or substance abuse. In addition, biological and hormonal factors play a role in perinatal depression.

Here are some of the associated risk factors with depression. A family history of depression, loss of one's own mother, childhood trauma or abuse. I'm not going to read all of them since you have your slides, but as you can see there's a variety of risk factors that lead into depression.

In the U.S. twice as many women as men are depressed each year. Over 12 million women and 6 million men are affected. For low income women the estimated prevalence doubles to 25% and it's most prevalent among women of

childbearing and child rearing age, which is 16 to 53. Among mothers, estimated rates of depression range from 8% to 20%. For low income women with young children, prevalence rates are commonly estimated at approximately 40% or higher, depending on the population and the studies done.

Caregiver depression is an issue for early childhood. It affects children in a variety of ways. Overall male depression is estimated at 6% but community samples have found prevalence rates ranging up to 25% in fathers. And studies have shown that maternal depression is the greatest predictor of paternal depression, depression in fathers. Those rates skyrocket to 25% to 50% when a woman is depressed.

Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren also frequently suffer from depression. A Head Start study found that 10% of grandparents raising their grandchildren were moderately depressed and 17% were severely depressed. In addition, 27% showed symptoms of mild depression. Caregivers in low income and non-subsidized care centers are also disproportionately likely to suffer from depression. So again, another factor in children.

Depression affects parenting in a variety of ways. It reduces self-esteem and self-efficacy, leading to a reduction in empowerment. It creates problems with nurturing and interacting with children. Mothers who are depressed are less able to bond with their children. Parents who are depressed are less likely to engage

in positive parenting practices, such as reading to their children and interacting with them in a variety of ways and also less likely to engage in preventive health factors such as reading, car seats and asthma--following up on asthma treatment services. It may also lead to non-effective coping strategies, including substance abuse.

The other factors that frequently co-occur with depression can affect children as well, such as poverty, intimate partner violence and a history of trauma in the family. Depression affects children in a variety of ways. In particular their social emotional development. A child's earliest experience in relationships have lifelong consequences.

There's an increased risk of social and emotional problems in young children of depressed mothers. Jack Shonkoff at Harvard University's research has shown that nurturing in early childhood leads to healthy brains which allows the greatest ability to develop both academically and socially and emotionally. And parental depression is linked to a lack of school readiness and early school success, which includes poor cognitive development, more limited language skills, fewer social interaction skills and difficulty in engaging with adults.

These effects on children may endure across a child's lifespan. There's a significant risk for increased psychopathology and poor school outcomes and increased risk of depression among the adult children of depressed parents.

This does depend on the severity and the timing of the depression. The earlier the depression--a woman's depression is and the longer it lasts, the greater the effect on children. Strengthening the protective factors can mitigate the effects on young children even if it does not actually address the--reduce the maternal depression, but it is key to do both.

So the key take home messages for maternal depression and parenting are maternal depression often coexists with prior or concurrent trauma. Maternal depression is a caregiver's disease, thus it's a two generation condition affecting both mothers and children. Depression interferes with parenting in a variety of ways and the impact on children may be serious and may be of long duration. Structural barriers, such as lack of insurance, racism and disparities may leave many families outside treatment, however, depression is treatable. For more information, please contact us at Project Thrive. And now I'm going to turn this over to Mary.