

# **Prenatal origins of human cognitive and social-emotional development and of stress-related disorders: the influence of maternal stress and anxiety during pregnancy.**

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Can the influence of maternal emotions upon the foetus be established in the prenatal life period?

Is the prenatal influence of maternal emotions reflected in the postnatal development and behaviour of the child? How can we measure these influences? What are the underlying mechanisms?

Why do prenatal early life events enhance the risk for developing behavioural problems and stress-related disorders?

For the past twenty five years these questions have led scientific research in several fields. An overview of results of the studies is given and a model is presented that integrates results of human and animal research. We focus on long-term prospective studies in humans that included standardized measures of maternal and offspring behaviour and physiology (such as ultrasound, cortisol, event related potential and fMRI measures). The study of the prenatal environment is not only important in fundamental scientific research. We also discuss some of the public health implications in terms of improvement of outcome for children.