

Concussion can alter parent-child relationships

12 April 2016



Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

The incidence of concussion is particularly high in the preschool years - up to around 2% of children aged 0 to 5 years per year. A study by researchers at CHU Sainte-Justine mother-child research hospital (affiliated with the University of Montreal), recently published in the *Journal of Neuropsychology*, reveals the adverse effects of mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) on the quality parent-child relationships. "The young brain is particularly vulnerable to injury because the skull is still thin and malleable. In the months following the injury, one of the first visible signs of social difficulties in young children is a decline in their relationship with their parents," said Miriam Beauchamp a researcher at Sainte-Justine, professor of psychology at the University of Montreal and senior author of the study. Knowing that good parent-child relationships are synonymous with better social skills later in life, the researchers stress the importance for parents to monitor behaviour changes in their child in the weeks that follow the trauma and adjust accordingly during this period.

Given the relatively limited social and cognitive skills of preschoolers, a [concussion](#) at this age can slow the development of new abilities, for example, certain communication skills. "Very little data exists about the first signs of socialization problems in preschoolers after a concussion. Parent-child relationships represent the center of young children's social environments and are therefore ideal contexts for studying the potential effects of mTBI on children's social functioning," said Gabrielle Lalonde, BSc, a doctoral student and first author of the study.

The laboratory recruited a group of 130 children aged between 18 months and 60 months, divided into three categories: children with concussion, children with orthopedic injury (usually a fracture or sprain of the arm or leg) but no concussion, and a control group of non-injured children. The aim of the study was to assess the quality of parent-child interactions six months post-injury. "We asked parents to fill out a questionnaire so they could evaluate their relationship with their child. At the same time, they participated in a filmed evaluation session in the laboratory in which they and their children took part in typical daily activities - such as free play and snack time - allowing the researchers to measure the quality of their communication, cooperation, and the emotional atmosphere," said Miriam Beauchamp. "The quality of parent-child interactions following concussion was significantly reduced compared to non-injured children."

"Given that parent-child interactions are influenced by the emotional and behavioural dispositions of both the parent and the child, more research is required to identify the factors underlying this decline in their relationship. It may be due to specific neurological mechanisms, to changes in parenting, or to stress caused by the injury. Identifying these factors will help develop more targeted interventions to positively influence the quality of life of [children](#) and their families," said Lalonde.

"If, as parents, you notice the effects of the accident on your own psychological state, or behavioural changes in your child that make them interact differently and that persist more than a few weeks, you should talk to your family doctor or a neuropsychologist," said Beauchamp.

More information: Gabrielle Lalonde et al. Investigating social functioning after early mild TBI: the quality of parent-child interactions, *Journal of Neuropsychology* (2016). DOI: [10.1111/jnp.12104](https://doi.org/10.1111/jnp.12104)

Provided by University of Montreal

APA citation: Concussion can alter parent-child relationships (2016, April 12) retrieved 30 September 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-04-concussion-parent-child-relationships.html>

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