

DOES ABORTION INCREASE RISK OF PARENTING PROBLEMS?*

Associations between maternal history of abortion and problematic parenting, including lower emotional support and heightened risk for both child abuse and neglect have been reported in peer-reviewed studies [1-5]. For example, compared to women with no history of induced abortion those with one prior abortion were found to have a 144% increased risk of engaging in child maltreatment [3].

Complicated grieving [6,7], potential for engagement in self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse [8], enhanced mental health risks [9,10], and sleep disturbances [11,12], all substantiated risks associated with an abortion history, may contribute to problematic parenting.

Several additional conditions that foster a feeling of detachment, detract from a woman's feelings of satisfaction in parenting, and/or render a woman less able to engage spontaneously in parenting may be behind associations between abortion and parenting difficulties. Among the possible mechanisms are the following:

- 1) Due to shame, guilt, or violation of personal moral codes, women may feel undeserving of another child or they may have a sense that their child does not really belong to them.
- 2) Women may "punish" themselves by not letting go and completely enjoying their children.
- 3) If women feel as though their abortions constituted a poor choice, they may lack confidence or a sense of personal efficacy in decision-making.
- 4) Women may sense being judged by others and feel very self-conscious in parenting.
- 5) Women may experience significant stress in parenting as they attempt to be perfect mothers to prove to themselves that they are good parents if the abortion hindered the development of or detracted from their maternal identity
- 6) A biologically or psychologically based thwarting of the maternal instinct is possible since the decision to abort is diametrically opposed to the protection and nurturance which the pregnant body and psyche are programmed to engage in.

More research attention should be devoted to understanding women who abort and experience conflict between societal messages that deny the personhood of the fetus and their feelings of attachment and grief to this "non-entity". Any self-doubt or compromised self-esteem initiated by the choice to abort may worsen when there is a sense that one is

not adjusting like “most women”. Professionals have not made research on women’s views of the fetus and feelings of attachment prior to termination a priority in efforts to understand how abortion may impair mental health and future parenting.

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