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To find out more:

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**“My husband and I are both going to support group now. It's helped us feel more upbeat about our lives and our kids.”**

**“Yeah, my daughter was feeling down, too, after my injury. But our church group really reached out to her. It's been a big help.”**

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What did we find?

When we compared parents with TBI to parents in families with no brain injury, we found very few differences. For most of the 18 skills evaluated, no differences were seen. For example, parents with TBI were similar to parents without a disability in the degree to which they encourage their children to think for themselves, in the degree to which they use anger or guilt to control their child's behavior and in how much stress they experience in running a household and in taking care of their children. In these and many other ways, parenting skills were very much alike.

Parents with TBI did rate themselves differently than similar parents without a disability in four parenting areas: They saw themselves as less accepting of their children, less able to express positive feelings toward their children, less encouraging of their children's skills and putting less pressure on their children to be orderly and conforming. Their spouses rated themselves as less loving and accepting than similar people whose spouses did not have a brain injury. Interestingly, the children, in their ratings of their parents' skills, did not agree with any of these perceptions held by their parents. Instead, the children in the families living with the consequences of brain injury saw both of their parents as being less insistent on the child's following rules and standards than in families with no brain injury.

In part, these differing perceptions between parents and children in households where TBI was a factor, may be due to another study finding. We found that parents after TBI were more depressed than parents without a disability; in fact, one in five parents with TBI were clinically depressed. In many families with a history of TBI, one or both parents were mildly depressed.

In looking at the children's lives, we found that in families where a parent had a TBI the child's behavior and daily life was viewed as similar to that of children in families without TBI (in the ratings given by parents and children). The only difference we found was that the children with a parent with TBI reported more depression than the other children in the study.

What do these findings mean?

Because this is a study of families in which the parent with TBI was injured, on average, nine years prior, our results speak to the question of what happens to parents with TBI and their children in the long run. In the immediate period after injury, the results of other studies suggest that children often have a hard time of it. Similarly, the injured parent during the early period post TBI may not be as able to parent as he or she would like. But, our study suggests that with time, the parent can learn again effective parenting skills — working around or compensating for the cognitive, emotional and behavioral challenges he or she faces. The parents and the children we interviewed were in large part faring well — with very few ‘clouds’ to darken the picture.

This study does not suggest that every person with a TBI will be a good parent. But it does say that when we looked at parents with TBI, who had largely long-term injuries of varying severity, most have met the challenge of parenting to a degree similar to parents like them but without a brain injury.

The study suggests that depression is a problem and a challenge for many of the parents and children in families that are contending with TBI. In terms of enhancing the quality of daily life in these families, parents and children need to seek help in dealing with their feelings, which may include sadness, anger, hopelessness and/or helplessness. This may mean challenging the depression through increased involvement in community life, seeking the help of a mental health professional, reaching out to others (such as a minister or a local brain injury self-help group) or considering the use of medications or exercise to reduce depressive symptoms. These approaches have all been found effective in dealing with mood difficulties. Such actions are important for all members of the family, not just the individual with TBI, particularly since all too often the spouse and children are ‘forgotten’ or themselves assume that the person with the TBI is the only one whose needs merit attention. The children in the families with parental TBI seem to be saying that both their parents are more lax than other parents. This suggests that parents and children each face a challenge. The parents may, when stressed by the realities of living with TBI, have less time and energy to pay attention to establishing structure, routines and expectations for their children. Their distraction with other important matters may communicate to the children that their parents do not care. For the kids, this mis-communication may translate into behavioral problems later in life. This is certainly an area of challenge that families need to look at carefully. In such families, parents need to exert more consistent discipline. Family meetings may help — at which guidelines and rules regarding children's
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To find out more:


What was the starting point for this research?

This study began in discussions we had with individuals with TBI who are parents. In talking about parenthood they mentioned both ‘clouds’ and ‘silver linings’ for people with TBI. The ‘clouds’ refer to concerns that TBI would get in the way of being a good parent. Fears that the children they have are suffering and that they, as parents, are not coping with the demands of parenting as well as they would like. The ‘silver linings’ they talked about included additional time many people had for spending with their children. Some parents, too, felt their children were stronger for what they had gone through. Hence, a mixed picture emerged, leading us to explore these views of post-TBI parenting in greater detail.

When we looked at research done by others we found studies showing that children of newly injured parents often have a rough time. They commonly experience feelings of depression and loss of attention due to the sudden, recent changes in their parent. However, no studies were available that took a look at children’s reactions to their parent with TBI over the long run. Nor did the research look at people with TBI many years after injury to see if their skills as parents were worse (or better) than those of non-injured parents. So, in our study, we asked, How do parents who are past the initial stages of injury meet the challenges of raising children — and how do their children fare?

We then contacted people (both with TBI and non-disabled) who had participated in a prior RTC study (see the box at left) who were parents of children between the ages of 7 and 18 living at home. We asked the person contacted, their spouse and one or more of their children to cover areas such as sharing household chores, doing homework, use of the telephone and TV, letting parents know of after-school plans, and the like. The parents’ taking the time to communicate clear expectations about their children’s behavior also communicates their caring, love and commitment to their children.

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