While researchers were surprised at the high incidence of depression, they also discovered that depressed mothers could have meaningful interactions with their children.

A recent study at Utah State University focused on improving language and literacy in children with developmental delays. But over the course of gathering the data, researchers were surprised to discover that 47 percent of their test subjects—who were all mothers of children with disabilities—met the screening criteria for depression. While the researchers were surprised at the high percentage of depressed mothers, they found some encouraging news, too: With support, depressed mothers still had meaningful interactions as they read with their children. The study involved mothers in Ogden and Salt Lake City. All were receiving early intervention services for their children. The involvement of student researchers added a deeper dimension to the study. “Their inquisitiveness, their reflection, their interest in helping children and families generated questions,” said Dr. Lisa Boyce, the study’s principal investigator. Dr. Boyce and a team of researchers from the Center for Persons with Disabilities’ Early Intervention Research Institute started the Using Technology for Emergent Literacy and Language (UTELL) project as a way to encourage language and literacy among children. It particularly focused on fostering interaction between parent and child—a subject that particularly interests Boyce. She argues that instead of demonstrating therapy while parents watch, professionals should involve parents in their in-home visits. Part of the study required students employed in the project to “code” videotaped interactions between mothers and children, using a scientifically-developed checklist that evaluates a parent’s affection, responsiveness, encouragement and teaching as they work and play with their children. Tyler Larsen, a junior in psychology, was one of the student researchers. As he watched the tapes, he noticed some mothers were involved and engaged with their children. Others sat back and watched. And while Tyler did not know which mothers might be depressed, he did know that a lot of them were at high risk for depression. Other student researchers had similar thoughts. Four students majoring in speech and language pathology were also employed in the project. They visited the homes of more than 100 study subjects. Like Larsen, they didn’t know for sure which mothers were depressed, but from what they observed, some seemed to be suffering. What’s more, said student researcher Jessica Cox, they found a correlation between a lower emphasis on literacy in the home and maternal depression. “It wasn’t as statistically significant as other variables, but it was significant,” Cox said. “The students were our eyes,” said Dr. Eduardo Ortiz, a researcher on the team who worked with the students. “They came up with excellent ideas. We learned from them as they learned from us.”

The students’ observations led to more questions, and researchers were surprised to find that 47 percent of the study subjects met the screening criteria for depression. What’s more, Dr. Boyce said researchers found they could predict whether a mother was depressed 75 percent of the time, based on three indicators: income, whether the mother perceived her child as difficult, and the interaction of both factors together. These findings are significant because earlier studies have found that children with depressed parents are more likely to have problems throughout their growing up years. (A recent LA Times article reported on studies linking parents’ depression to behavior problems, anxiety and mental health issues in their children. Even when those children grew up they had poorer health and were more likely to have substance abuse problems than their peers.) Interestingly, the mother’s perception of how difficult her child was did not always match reality. Since depression can distort a parent’s perception of her child, it is hard to say which came first—the mother’s depression or the child’s real or perceived behavior problems.
But researchers were encouraged to see the difference a little support could make. “When those mothers were asked to play with their children and interact, they did,” Dr. Boyce said. “They showed affection, they encouraged their children, they engaged in teaching/talking…. If they can do it when they’re asked to do it, what can we do to help them do this more often?”

The students’ work eventually landed Larsen on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. and spawned presentations in two undergraduate research conferences. Larsen presented during the national “Posters on the Hill” event. Cox and her research partner Amanda Burr participated in the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Missoula, Montana. Another pair of student researchers, Jessica Shaw and Allisa Blackburn, went to the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research.

All students were mentored by Lisa Boyce; the speech language pathology students were also mentored by Dr. Sandra Gillam. All five students plan to go on to graduate school.

“I look at research differently now,” said student researcher Amanda Burr. “When people tell me a statistic I think, ‘let’s think about that.’ … Now I have questions about all sorts of things.”