Exhaust fumes linked to bad behaviour

Children whose mothers were exposed to high levels of exhaust fumes in pregnancy tend to behave worse at school, a study indicates.

Can traffic pollution cause bad behaviour in children? Photo: CORBIS

By Stephen Adams, Medical Correspondent
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Researchers found that high levels of exposure to a common type of pollution in pregnancy was "significantly associated" with anxiety, depression and attention problems when the children were six or seven.

Academics at Columbia University in New York measured maternal levels of a particular type of pollution caused when petrol or diesel is not burnt properly.

All 253 women they studied, none of whom smoked, were exposed when pregnant to the chemicals, called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). Levels varied widely and they found that women exposed to more traffic pollution during pregnancy tended to have children with more behaviour problems.

Dr Frederica Perera, the study's lead author, said: "The results are of concern because attention problems and anxiety and depression have been shown to affect peer relationships and academic performance."

However, the findings of the study, published in the journal Environmental Health Perspectives, do not
prove pollution causes bad behaviour.