

Research shows children with reading problems more likely to suffer depression and anxiety

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The Bottom Line:

Up until now, our understanding of the link between reading problems and emotional problems has been like the proverbial “chicken and egg”: Do reading problems cause emotional problems in children, or does having emotional problems cause children to have reading problems? This study of Grade 3 children from poor backgrounds found that it’s the reading problems that create emotional distress. If the reading problems persisted into Grade 5, these problems tended to be worse. Aggression was not found to be related to reading problems.

What problem is being addressed?

Many children from economically and socially disadvantaged homes are known to have problems with academic subjects like reading. They also seem to have emotional problems like [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). What has not been well understood is whether the emotional problems cause the school difficulties, or if the reading problems contribute to the emotional problems.

What intervention is being tested?

This is a long term study of children from economically disadvantaged homes who were followed from Grade 1 entry to Grade 5. Teacher, parent, and child reports were used to see how reading difficulties were related to having emotional or behavioural problems. 105 children entering Grade 1 were assessed for their cognitive ability. In Grade 5 they reported on their own emotional experiences. Problem behaviours in the classroom were measured using the Teacher Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist. Teachers rated whether the children were anxious, depressed, withdrawn, complained of frequent stomachaches or headaches, or showed aggressive behaviours. Participation in a reading assistance program in Grades 3 and 5 was the main measure of a reading problem.

What is the *real scientific* evidence?

By the time children reached Grade 3, having a reading problem predicted that they would have an emotional problem compared to children with no reading problems. By Grade 5, analysis confirmed that the children’s emotional problems were related to having reading problems and not the other way around. Even when the researchers looked at other social problems the children had, the findings still related their depression and anxiety to having problems reading. Those children whose reading problems

persisted into Grade 5 had worse emotional problems than children whose reading problems were resolved by Grade 4. Aggression was not found to be related to reading problems.

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The preceding is a summary of:

Ackerman BP, Izard CE, Kobak R, Brown ED. *Relation Between Reading Problems and Internalizing Behavior in School for Preadolescent Children from Economically Disadvantaged Families*. *Child Development* 2007, 78(2): 581-596.