

Teens with poor reading skills at high risk of mental health problems

In short....

Teenagers with reading problems are more likely than classmates without reading problems to have [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder \(AD/HD\)](#), experience [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), and use drugs as they get older. They also have problems getting along with other people, taking on more adult responsibilities, and think more often about harming themselves.

The Issue: Studies have shown that children who have reading problems tend to feel anxious and sad about their situation and themselves. When children's reading problems persist into adolescence, more serious consequences can occur. Teens who aren't able to read as well as their peers are at a severe disadvantage at school, where more and more of their learning is based on the ability to handle the material in complex textbooks and the ability to understand written instructions for assignments. Peer approval is important to teenagers, who may fear ridicule if they are unable to read aloud in class or do presentations. Criticism from teachers may also make teens fear school assignments and cause them to miss classes, which only compounds their problems.

The Research: This is a study of whether or not teens with poor reading skills are more likely to suffer from anxiety (including [generalized anxiety disorder](#) and [social phobia](#)), depression, and AD/HD than their peers with typical reading skills.

The Results: 186 adolescents from a large school district, 94 of them with poor reading skills and 94 them with normal reading skills, were involved in a study that followed them for up to 4 _ years. Each year the participants were given standard tests to determine if they had anxiety, depression, behaviour problems, or AD/HD. They were also questioned about their general ability to cope in life and to take on more adult responsibility as they matured.

The researchers found that teenagers with reading problems were much more likely to have an anxiety disorder or depression. Some of the teens with reading problems tended to have problems with substance abuse as they got older. They also had more trouble than their peers getting along with others and taking on more responsibilities, and were more likely to think about harming themselves.

This research helps to demonstrate that reading problems lead to reduced achievement and psychiatric illnesses in teenagers. It is imperative that reading remediation be introduced early in a child's school career and maintained in high school.

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The preceding is a summary of: Goldston DB, Walsh A, Arnold EM, Reboussin B, Daniel SS, Erkanli A, et al. Reading problems, psychiatric disorders, and functional impairment from mid-to-late adolescence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 2007, 46(1): 25-32.