

Research reveals hidden anguish of schoolchildren with autism

December 18 2012

(Medical Xpress)—Schoolchildren on the autistic spectrum experience worrying levels of mental health difficulties, according to a new study by research psychologists from The University of Manchester.

The findings, published early next year in the *Journal of Research in [Special Educational Needs](#)*, reveals the difficulties endured by many young people on the autistic spectrum, compared with their peers.

Dr Judith Hebron, a specialist in [autism research](#), said: "A good number of [children](#) on the autistic spectrum are performing well at school, which makes it very difficult for teachers to spot the degree of anxiety they suffer, especially as many consciously hide it or try to find strategies to deal with it unsupported.

"Schools are such intensely social environments, compounding the worries of children on the autistic spectrum about how other children see them or how to deal with unstructured [social situations](#).

"Any [social context](#) is a challenge for them. These young people are also at increased risk of becoming the victims of bullying, making school a constantly challenging environment.

"Many children expend huge amounts of energy trying to appear 'normal', but this can lead to intolerable [stress levels](#) that may then result in outbursts which are easily mistaken for [bad behaviour](#) – especially when it affects other children or family life."

The study, co-authored with Manchester's Professor Neil Humphrey, assessed 22 children with autism, 21 children without special education needs, and 23 children with dyslexia. Five young people with autism also took part in interviews.

Prevalence rates for anxiety, depression, self worth, anger and disruptive behaviour were all highest for children with autism, though anxiety was by far the most significant, with 59.1 per cent demonstrating clinical levels.

The research will resonate with the parents and carers of the 70 per cent of all children with autism who attend mainstream schools –representing approximately 1 per cent of all school pupils.

Dr Hebron added: "This is a difficult problem to address as it is often hidden,

"But as children experiencing chronic stress and anxiety are more likely to suffer from mental health problems in the future, it's vitally important we are aware of these issues and intervene early in order to minimise the risk.

"Many mainstream schools are doing excellent work in supporting and including young people on the autistic spectrum: there are ways to moderate their anxiety.

"It is also possible teach tolerance of difference to other children, but we hope this study will offer support for existing strategies and provide exploratory ideas for new ones."

Provided by University of Manchester

Citation: Research reveals hidden anguish of schoolchildren with autism (2012, December 18)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-reveals-hidden-anguish-schoolchildren-autism.html>

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