

Closer personal relationships could help teens overcome learning disabilities

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A new study from a Tel Aviv University researcher says that children with learning disabilities develop less secure attachments with mothers and teachers, and that closer and more secure relationships with parents and adults may help them overcome these disabilities.

In addition to struggling in school, many learning disabled children are known to face social and [emotional challenges](#) including depression, anxiety, and isolation. Often beginning early in childhood, they become more pronounced during adolescence, an emotionally turbulent time.

For these youngsters, more positive relationships with the significant adults in their lives—including parents and teachers—can improve learning and "socioemotional" experiences, says Dr. Michal Al-Yagon of Tel Aviv University's Jaime and Joan Constantiner School of Education. In a recent study published in the [Journal of Youth and Adolescence](#), she reported that teens with learning disabilities were less likely to have secure attachment relationships to their mothers and teachers compared to peers without learning disabilities.

The absence of such close and supportive relationships had an adverse effect on the teens' social and emotional functioning, contributing to behavioral problems including isolation, depression, and aggression. "We found that more secure child-adult attachments may act as a protective factor during this developmental period, whereas insecure attachments are a risk factor" for social and [emotional issues](#), Dr. Al-Yagon says.

These results could help researchers design more effective interventions for children and adolescents with learning disabilities. Helping to strengthen their relationships with parents and teachers may decrease their emotional and behavioral problems.

The power of attachment

[Attachment theory](#), which describes long-term relationship dynamics, seeks to explain how [parental involvement](#), availability, and support can shape a child's [social and emotional development](#). Insecure attachments are damaging to a child, hindering future relationships with peers, romantic partners, and family members.

For this study, Dr. Al-Yagon measured the socioemotional state and the security of attachments to parents and teachers for 181 adolescents with learning disabilities and 188 with typical development, all between the ages of 15-17. Participants completed a series of questionnaires regarding their attachment to their mother and father, perceived teacher availability and rejection, loneliness, experience of positive and negative emotions and behavioral problems.

Adolescents with learning disabilities were discovered to have less secure attachments with significant adult figures compared to their non-disabled peers, which had a direct impact on their socioemotional state. Within the disabled group, those who had more secure attachments to their mother and father, or who considered their teacher caring and available, exhibited fewer negative emotions, feelings of loneliness, and behavior problems—all of which can interfere with learning.

Building closer relationships

These findings can help guide clinicians in developing effective

treatment strategies, says Dr. Al-Yagon. Examples include family intervention techniques that focus on creating more secure attachments between parents and children, or school workshops to help teachers understand the needs of their learning disabled students and make more of an effort to include them in classroom activities.

While social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties cannot be entirely avoided, Dr. Al-Yagon believes that a little effort, care, and attention can go a long way toward helping learning [disabled children](#) and teens feel happier and more secure. "[Parents and teachers](#) should be aware not just of academic difficulties, but also of socioemotional difficulties – and work to treat them. They should not avoid or ignore issues such as depression or aggression, which are another dimension of the original problem," she advises.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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