

One in six women with learning disabilities has attempted suicide

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A new study by the University of Toronto found that the lifetime prevalence of suicide attempts was much higher for women who had been diagnosed with learning disabilities (16.6%) compared to women who had not (3.3%). Men with learning disabilities also were more likely to have attempted suicide compared to men without learning disorders (7.7% vs 2.1%).

"Learning disabilities such as dyslexia cast a very long shadow. Adults with learning disabilities still had 46% higher odds of having attempted suicide than their peers without learning problems, even when we took into account a wide range of other risk factors including lifetime history of depression and substance abuse, ADHD, early adversities, age, race, sex, income and education" reported lead author Professor Esme Fuller-Thomson, Sandra Rotman Endowed Chair at University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Director of Institute for Life Course and Aging.

"When we focused only on individuals in the survey with learning disorders, we found that people who had been exposed to chronic parental domestic violence had double the odds of suicide attempts" said co-author Samara Z. Carroll, a recent University of Toronto [social work](#) graduate.

Parental domestic violence was defined as "chronic" if it had occurred more than 10 times before the respondent was age 16. "The cross-sectional nature of this study prohibits our ability to determine causality. The relationship between chronic parental domestic violence and suicide attempts could flow in either direction. We speculate that parental violent conflict could be an indicator of poor childhood circumstances (disorganized household, lack of social supports, [low socioeconomic status](#), lack of reading in the home, etc.) which may increase the likelihood of learning disabilities. The higher stress levels in these homes may undermine children's ability to focus or ask for help, thereby impairing learning. Alternatively, a child's scholastic underperformance may cause parental conflict, which may escalate into domestic violence" stated Carroll.

Adults with learning disabilities who had been sexually abused in childhood also had twice the odds of having ever attempted suicide and those with a history of major depression had seven times the risk. Both

childhood sexual abuse and depression are well-established risk factor for suicidal behaviors in the general population.

The study examined a nationally representative sample of 21,744 community-dwelling Canadians, of whom 745 reported they had been diagnosed with learning disabilities. Data were drawn from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey-Mental Health.

"The disturbingly high prevalence of suicide attempts among people with learning disabilities underline the importance of health professionals screening patients with learning disabilities for mental illness and suicidal thoughts." said Wook Yang, a co-author and doctoral student in the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

Fuller-Thomson also noted "our findings of the strong link between learning disabilities and [suicide attempts](#) provide an additional reason to prioritize the early detection and timely provision of effective [educational interventions](#) for children with dyslexia and other learning problems. In addition to the benefits of these treatment for improving learning skills and academic success, it is possible that they may also decrease long-term [suicide](#) risk. It is unacceptable that many children with learning [disabilities](#) languish for years on waiting-lists for needed educational interventions."

The paper was published online today in the journal *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

More information: "Suicide Attempts Among Individuals with Specific Learning Disorders: An Underrecognized Issue" by E. Fuller-Thomson, S.Z. Carroll & W. Yang, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 2017.

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