

Learning disabilities diagnosed in childhood are associated with adult-age psychological wellbeing

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Recently published research shows that learning disabilities (LD) diagnosed in childhood are associated with adult-age mental health problems, delays or difficulties in attaining an educational degree, and unemployment.

In the longitudinal study conducted by the Niilo Mäki Institute and University of Jyväskylä Finland, individuals with childhood LD (n = 439) were compared to a population-based control group (n = 2,149). The results indicated that the proportion of individuals receiving reimbursements for psychoactive medication, not having attained a degree after compulsory education, or receiving unemployment allowances for an extended period (i.e., more than 258 days) was higher in the LD group than in the control group.

Comparisons of different LD subtypes indicated that math disability (MD) was associated with antidepressant use and unemployment, whereas the reading disability (RD) group showed the least problems with employment. Interactions between the subgroups and gender suggested that MD (with/without RD) may pose a higher risk than RD for females, whereas RD seemed to pose a risk for males.

"Our findings suggest that strategies and personal attributes aimed at circumventing learning-related difficulties should be included in special education early on, and psychological wellbeing, self-esteem and self-

acceptance should be given at least equal attention as efforts to enhance academic skills", concludes university lecturer, neuropsychologist and psychotherapist Tuija Aro, from the Department of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä.

"Further research is needed to understand individual developmental trajectories, that is, why some individuals are better able to cope with their LD than others," says doctoral student and psychologist Anna-Kaija Eloranta.

Learning disabilities are not restricted to childhood

Learning disability refers to difficulties in learning basic reading, spelling, or mathematic skills. LD is not a problem with intelligence or motivation or the result of a lack of learning opportunities. There is no exact information on the frequency of LDs in Finland, but it is estimated that 5% to 10% of pupils have an LD of some kind. This means it is likely that every classroom has at least one or two students with an LD. Although LDs are developmental in nature, they are known to often persist into adulthood, posing a risk for education, employment, and adult-age mental health.

Merging childhood clinical archived data with life-long follow-up register data provided new understanding on adult-age outcomes

The study is part of follow-up research tracing the lives of individuals with LDs who attended the Clinic for Learning Disorders (CLD) in their childhood and have reached adult age (i.e., 20 years). The CLD is a public clinic run by the Niilo Mäki Institute and the City of Jyväskylä's Family Counseling Center, Finland. The CLD has served Central Finland since 1985, offering assessment and counseling for children with specific LDs, mainly referred by the Family Counseling Center's or school psychologists.

The study merged nationally and internationally rare clinical archived data from the CLD with register data provided by the Population Register Center, Statistics Finland, and National Social Insurance Institution of Finland. The focus of the present study was on RD, MD and their comorbidity (RD + MD). The adult-age outcomes were sickness allowances or disability pensions received on the basis of psychiatric diagnoses, reimbursements for psychoactive medication expenses, attained educational degree after compulsory education and basic unemployment allowance.

The study was conducted by university lecturer Tuija Aro, university lecturer Kenneth Eklund, doctoral student Anna-Kaija Eloranta, university researcher Vesa Närhi, statistician Elisa Korhonen, and the founder of the CLD, professor emeritus Timo Ahonen. The study was published in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

More information: Tuija Aro et al. Associations Between Childhood Learning Disabilities and Adult-Age Mental Health Problems, Lack of Education, and Unemployment, *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0022219418775118](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219418775118)

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