

Study links low language ability and poor mental health

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Khayelitsha is a township near Cape Town, South Africa. Credit: University of Bath

One of the first studies of its kind focusing on South African children's language ability and mental health outcomes, has found clear evidence for a link between low language ability and depression in young people.

The study, published today in the journal *PLOS One* from researchers at

the University of Bath (UK) and Stellenbosch University (South Africa) studied [language ability](#) and outcomes for 200 13-year-olds in Khayelitsha—a semi-urban, impoverished township outside Cape Town.

Their results highlight a strong relationship between lower [language](#) ability and ADHD-type attention problems and also show a more general association between high language ability and better self-esteem in young people. Adolescents with low language ability additionally had higher levels of depressive symptoms. These findings mirror previous research carried out mainly in the UK and US, yet this study is one of the first to focus on the issue in the context of a low-middle income country.

Lead author Dr. Michelle St Clair from the University's Department of Psychology, said: "Children and adolescents with delayed or disordered [language development](#) are at increased risk of a number of negative outcomes, including social and [emotional problems](#) and mental [health](#) difficulties. Yet, in low- and middle- income countries, where [risk factors](#) for compromised language development are known to be prevalent, there is a lack of research on the association between child and adolescent language ability and [mental health outcomes](#).

"I hope these findings raise awareness of how important good language skills are for so many different aspects of our lives. These findings highlight the importance of early parental engagement in supporting their child's language development." The team suggests that more needs to be done to highlight the benefits of developing early language skills for behavior, academic and mental health outcomes to parents in communities, such as Khayelitsha.

"This is a very simple intervention. Better awareness of how easily parents can enhance their children's language abilities in early life may in time help to reduce behavior problems and mental health difficulties,"

added Dr. St Clair.

Dr. Sarah Skeen of the Institute for Life Course Health Research, Department of Global Health, Stellenbosch University, South Africa explained: "Language development is central to many aspects of children's lives. Language skills are essential for successful communication of emotions, needs and thoughts, and to maintain relationships with others. Language also underpins the development of a range of psychological processes, such as emotional self-regulation which in turn predicts a range of positive outcomes, including better interpersonal relationships and academic achievement.

"When children or adolescents have delayed or disordered language development, there is a long-term negative impact on their well-being. They are more likely to perform poorly at school and be unemployed as adults. They are less likely to have good social skills and tend to exhibit withdrawn behavior. Poor language skills are linked with problems in peer relationships and difficulties with friendship development

"We need to factor this new knowledge into our education programs and do more to ensure locally accessible support for children with reduced language ability is available, given the longer-term consequences of poorer mental health."

More information: Michelle C. St Clair et al. Relationships between concurrent language ability and mental health outcomes in a South African sample of 13-year-olds, *PLOS ONE* (2019). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0221242](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221242)

Provided by University of Bath

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