

Stammering may be linked with anxiety in some children and adolescents

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Children and adolescents who stammer report elevated symptoms of anxiety compared with non-stammering peers, according to a new review of evidence led by UCL researchers.

The study, published in the *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research* and also involving the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, combined and re-analyzed findings from 11 previous studies that had compared children and adolescents (two to 18 years) who do and do not stammer on symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Although there was substantial variation in reported anxiety symptoms across studies, overall, children and adolescents who stammer report higher anxiety symptoms than peers. There were too few studies concerning depression to reliably comment on risk for youth who stammer.

Stammering affects around 5–8 percent of school-aged children. Heightened risk for anxiety in adults who stammer is well documented, but little is known about the onset of anxiety in this population.

Lead author, Ph.D. candidate Ria Bernard (UCL Psychology & Language Sciences), said: "An important finding from this review is that children and adolescents who stammer are not a homogeneous group. It is likely that a multitude of factors are involved in both risk and resilience for anxiety in this population. We were unable to robustly look at potential moderating factors with the data available and so there is a need for further research in this area."

The high variability in outcome means that not all young people who stammer experience anxiety. The authors suggest that elevated anxiety may reflect other risk factors such as exposure to [bullying](#), access to therapy, or family history of anxiety and depression, which may increase risk or resilience in children and adolescents who stammer. Few studies reported these additional variables, so it is currently unclear what factors contribute to this increased risk.

Most importantly, these findings cannot address the impact of

intervention on anxiety. Intervention approaches may focus on improving fluency, strategies for coping with dysfluent speech, or a combination of the two.

The study results do, however, highlight the need to carefully monitor the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents who stammer.

Action for Stammering Children Charity who funded this research in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), said: "The findings from this review are important when thinking about how we best support children who stammer and their families. Early identification and access to Speech and Language Therapy services are vital to improving well-being and ensuring that children receive the support that they need."

The authors emphasize that the studies reviewed predominantly examined anxiety in mid-childhood. Additionally, the lack of longitudinal studies make it hard to understand why some children who stammer experience greater symptoms of anxiety while others do not. Ideally, longitudinal studies that follow large groups of children who stammer over time would help us understand the association between stammering and anxiety over the course of development.

More information: Ria Bernard et al, Anxiety and Depression Symptoms in Children and Adolescents Who Stutter: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1044/2021_JSLHR-21-00236](https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_JSLHR-21-00236)

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