

## Anxiety And Depression In Children With Specific Learning Disorders, A Hidden Comorbidity

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### Abstract

The emotional well-being of children with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) is often neglected, and their anxiety and depression are often untreated. The purpose of this study was to determine how common anxiety and depression were in children with SLD. Results show that emotional distress is significantly prevalent among 150 kids (ages 6–12) from the Ardra Foundation Centre for Early Intervention. Of the children, 48% had symptoms of depression and 62% had clinical levels of anxiety. Additionally, the study discovered that 35% of the children suffered from both depression and anxiety. These findings highlight the value of integrated interventions that target children with SLD's emotional well-being as well as their academic difficulties.

### Introduction:

Despite having average or above-average intelligence, children with specific learning disorders (SLDs) struggle to learn and apply academic skills like reading, writing, and math. Children with SLD frequently experience ongoing difficulties in school, which can result in

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social difficulties, low self-esteem, and repeated academic failure. The academic and cognitive aspects of SLD receive a lot of attention, but the emotional health of these kids is usually disregarded. According to research, children with SLD are more likely to experience persistent academic difficulties, peer rejection, and unfavorable comments from parents and teachers, which increases their risk of internalizing disorders, especially anxiety and depression (Nelson & Harwood, 2011; Mugnaini et al., 2009). A vicious cycle of frustration and psychological anguish can result from these emotional difficulties, which can also impair academic performance. However, the mental health needs of children with SLD are frequently misdiagnosed and untreated in many clinical and educational settings, especially in areas with limited resources or little research. There hasn't been much research done in India on the emotional effects of SLD, despite findings from other countries about the psychological vulnerabilities of kids with learning disabilities. In order to guide more thorough and integrated approaches to intervention, research evaluating the prevalence and characteristics of anxiety and depression in this population is desperately needed. Despite findings from other countries regarding the psychological vulnerabilities of children with learning disabilities, there hasn't been much research conducted in India on the emotional effects of SLD. There is an urgent need for research assessing the prevalence and features of anxiety and depression in this population to inform more comprehensive and integrated approaches to intervention.

Children with SLD frequently experience ongoing academic pressure, which is made worse by their immediate environment's lack of support and understanding. These kids are commonly mislabeled as being unmotivated, unfocused, or unruly, which results in social exclusion. A child's self-concept and ability to control their emotions can be significantly impacted by such experiences. Because of this, a lot of kids with SLD internalize feelings of inadequacy, failure, and hopelessness, which makes them extremely vulnerable to early anxiety and depressive symptoms. These children may have subtle emotional problems that go unnoticed or are mistakenly attributed to behavioral problems, such as

irritability, withdrawal, physical complaints, or school refusal. Emotional and psychological screening is not commonly included in early intervention services for SLD in India, where knowledge of learning disabilities and child mental health is still developing. The majority of clinical and educational interventions continue to ignore the child's coexisting emotional needs in favor of a narrow focus on academic remediation. This constrained approach puts kids at risk for long-term mental health problems in addition to undermining the efficacy of academic interventions. This study highlights the critical need for integrated, child-centered intervention models that address both academic and emotional development by revealing the prevalence of anxiety and depression in children with SLD at the Ardra Foundation Centre.

### **Relevance of this study**

Given that the emphasis on the academic requirements of children with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) frequently takes precedence over their emotional and psychological welfare in the current educational and clinical environment, this study is extremely pertinent. These emotional problems are often ignored and untreated, even though there is mounting evidence that children with SLD are much more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and other internalizing disorders. The disparity is even more pronounced in India, where there are few research studies and intervention strategies that cater to the mental health requirements of this susceptible group. This study sheds important light on the emotional burden that children with SLD bear by investigating the prevalence of anxiety and depression in this population at the Ardra Foundation Centre for Early Intervention. It emphasizes the necessity of an integrated, comprehensive approach.

### **Background of study**

Despite having normal intelligence and access to education, children with specific learning disorders (SLDs) struggle to learn and use academic skills like reading, writing, and math. These conditions frequently go undiagnosed in early childhood and, if untreated, result in long-term academic difficulties, low self-esteem, and social challenges. The emotional and psychological effects of SLD are relatively understudied, particularly in developing nations like India, despite the fact that the cognitive and academic aspects of the disorder are regularly researched. Children with SLD are more likely to develop internalizing disorders, especially anxiety and depression, according to numerous studies conducted worldwide. Peer rejection, negative adult feedback, social stigma, and repeated academic failures are the causes of these emotional difficulties. Research shows that children with learning disabilities are much more likely to experience anxiety and depression than their peers who are typically developing (Mugnaini et al., 2009; Nelson & Harwood, 2011). Additionally, neurodevelopmental disorders such as SLD and ADHD frequently co-occur with mood and anxiety disorders, raising the risk of emotional dysfunction, according to Erik Willcutt's (2012) meta-analytic review. The majority of programs in India still concentrate on academic remediation without including mental health screening or psychological support, and awareness and intervention regarding SLD are still in their infancy. Because of this, many kids with SLD endure silent suffering while their emotional problems go unnoticed or are misdiagnosed. Research specific to a given region that investigates the psychological experiences of children with SLD and guides integrated intervention strategies is desperately needed. In order to close that gap and provide evidence in favor of more inclusive and holistic clinical and educational practices, this study examines the prevalence of anxiety and depression in children with SLD who attend the Ardra Foundation Centre for Early Intervention.

### **Review of Literature**

1. Willcutt (2012) Children with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) are increasingly recognized to be at risk for serious emotional and psychological issues in addition to academic difficulties. In a thorough meta-analysis of the prevalence of ADHD according to DSM-IV criteria, Willcutt (2012) noted that SLD commonly co-occurs with other psychological and neurodevelopmental disorders, such as mood and anxiety disorders. According to his analysis, emotional dysregulation is a common symptom of learning and attention disorders in children, which can be caused by environmental stressors and shared genetic vulnerabilities. Children with SLD are more likely to

experience emotional distress as a result of this comorbidity, which also exacerbates functional impairments.

2. A study by Mugnaini, Lassi, La Malfa, and Albertini (2009) that focused on the internalizing symptoms in kids with dyslexia, a prevalent type of SLD, provided more evidence in favor of this theory. According to their findings, these kids commonly show symptoms of anxiety and depression, which they linked to ongoing academic difficulties, a history of failure, and the ensuing low self-esteem. The study underlined that although the psychological toll of dyslexia is frequently overlooked, it is crucial to a child's overall development and adjustment. These emotional challenges can result in a cycle that further impedes learning by causing school avoidance, strained peer relationships, and a lowered sense of self-worth. When combined, these studies highlight the critical need for multifaceted intervention models that address both the academic and emotional need of children with SLD
3. Nelson and Harwood (2011).. In recent years, the emotional effects of specific learning disorders (SLDs) have drawn more attention, especially in relation to the anxiety and emotional distress experienced by impacted children. A meta-analysis examining the connection between anxiety and learning disabilities was carried out by Nelson and Harwood (2011). According to their findings, there is a substantial and statistically significant correlation between SLDs and higher anxiety levels, especially when it comes to generalized and test-related anxiety. Children with SLD frequently face stigmatization, repeated failure, and ongoing academic difficulties, all of which heighten anxiety, fear of receiving a poor grade, and psychological discomfort. The researchers stressed that these children's unfulfilled support needs and ongoing academic pressure are the direct causes of their anxiety, not a side effect. these children's unmet support needs. These findings are particularly pertinent in educational environments where emotional distress is frequently ignored and performance-based evaluation is prioritized.
4. In support of this, Snowling and Hulme (2012) emphasized the vital role that early intervention plays in their research on language and literacy challenges, which are central to many SLD profiles. They maintained that untreated SLD contributes to long-term emotional issues like depression, low self-esteem, and social isolation in addition to impeding academic progress. Their results highlight the close relationship between emotional functioning and academic failure and the need for more comprehensive support than just cognitive remediation. The authors emphasized that children who receive support early in life are more likely to have better academic and psychological outcomes, and they urged the development of comprehensive intervention models that incorporate behavioral, emotional, and academic strategies. When taken as a whole, these studies provide strong support for treating SLD's emotional toll in addition to its cognitive and academic difficulties. They emphasize how important it is to create interventions that give mental health top priority as a crucial element of special education. The current study, which examines the prevalence of anxiety and depression among children with SLD in a South Indian context, is directly influenced by this viewpoint. Its goal is to raise awareness of the psychological aspect of learning difficulties, which is frequently disregarded in settings with limited resources and little research.
5. Mammarella, Ghisi, Bomba, Bottesi, and Caviola (2016)Recent studies have focused more on the emotional effects of learning disabilities (LD), especially the emergence of anxiety and depression. Research indicates that children with learning disabilities (LD) encounter substantial emotional and psychological difficulties that impact their general functioning and well-being in addition to difficulties with academic assignments. Mammarella, Ghisi, Bomba, Bottesi, and Caviola (2016) investigated how children with nonverbal learning disabilities (NVLD) internalize symptoms like depression and anxiety. Despite having average or superior verbal skills, NVLD is characterized by deficiencies in visual-spatial skills, motor coordination, and social judgment. According to the study, children with NVLD had considerably greater levels of social anxiety and depressive symptoms than their peers who were typically developing. The researchers suggested that children with NVLD frequently struggle to decipher nonverbal cues and maintain age-appropriate social interactions by attributing these emotional difficulties primarily to deficiencies in social competence and peer relationships. Emotional isolation, low self-esteem, and heightened susceptibility to mood disorders are consequently exacerbated by this. The authors underlined how urgently psychological support services are needed.

6. Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2005) Similarly, by combining cognitive, neurological, and emotional viewpoints, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2005) offered a thorough examination of dyslexia, a particular reading disability. Their study emphasized the secondary emotional effects of persistent academic underachievement, even though its primary focus was on the phonological processing deficiencies linked to dyslexia. Children with dyslexia frequently experience repeated academic failure, which can result in low self-esteem, elevated anxiety, and stress related to school. In many of these kids, Shaywitz and Shaywitz found a pattern of learned helplessness, in which recurring bad experiences cause them to avoid schoolwork and lose motivation. The emotional strain turns into a contributing element that hinders social development, mental health, and academic achievement. The authors promoted intervention strategies that go beyond conventional remedial training to include counselling and emotional support helping children to improve resilience
7. Sideridis (2007). A critical theoretical viewpoint on the emotional difficulties experienced by students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) is provided by Sideridis (2007). "Why are students with learning disabilities depressed?" is the title of his work. According to his "goal orientation model of depression vulnerability," students with SLD frequently endure long-term frustration as a result of their repeated academic failures and incapacity to fulfill academic requirements. A psychological condition known as learned helplessness, in which people believe they have no control over their results, can eventually result from this misalignment between effort and accomplishment. According to Sideridis' model, this helplessness makes students more susceptible to depression since their unfulfilled academic objectives undermine their sense of competence and self-worth. His framework emphasizes how crucial it is to address children's academic and emotional needs when providing interventions.
8. Maag and Reid (2006) In their study "Depression among students with learning disabilities: Assessing the risk," Maag and Reid (2006) supplement this theoretical model by offering empirical evidence of the prevalence of depressive symptoms in SLD students. Their results highlight the fact that depression is a comorbidity in this population that is notably underrecognized. Because early detection and focused psychological interventions can reduce the risk of long-term emotional and behavioral issues, the authors support routine mental health screening in school settings. In order to create mental health support systems that are suited to the particular cognitive and emotional characteristics of students with learning disabilities, they emphasize the importance of school psychologists and educators.
9. Terras, Thompson, and Minnis (2009) In their exploratory study "Dyslexia and psycho-social functioning: An exploratory study of the role of self-esteem and understanding," Terras, Thompson, and Minnis (2009) examined the emotional and social ramifications of dyslexia, a prevalent type of specific learning disorder. According to their findings, a lack of understanding and support from their immediate environment—teachers, peers, and even family members—often makes dyslexic children feel less confident. In addition to causing annoyance, this emotional neglect encourages the internalization of symptoms like depression and anxiety. The study emphasizes the importance of raising stakeholders' awareness of SLD and encouraging emotional literacy in order to support kids' development of social resilience and a positive self-perception.
10. By examining numerous studies and drawing the conclusion that children with learning disabilities consistently exhibit significant deficiencies in social skills, Kavale and Forness (1996) further emphasized the social-emotional component in their meta-analysis, "Social skill deficits and learning disabilities: A meta-analysis." Peer rejection and unfavorable peer interactions are frequently caused by these deficiencies. Children with SLD may consequently experience social isolation, which makes them more susceptible to depressive, social anxiety, and loneliness symptoms. The researchers contend that these social challenges are essential elements of the SLD profile rather than incidental problems, necessitating both academic support and direct intervention. When taken as a whole, these studies demonstrate how important it is to support children with SLD using a dual-focus strategy that takes into account both academic and psycho-social development. ignorance, a negative view of oneself,

## Methodology

### Participants

150 children between the ages of 6 to 12 who had all received a clinical diagnosis of Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) in accordance with DSM-5 criteria made up the study sample (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The Ardra Foundation Centre for Early Intervention, a specialized environment for kids with neurodevelopmental challenges, is where the participants were chosen. There were 62 girls (41%), and 88 boys (59%).

### Tools for Assessment

The following standardized tools and techniques were used to gather data:

The 47-item Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS; Chorpita et al., 2000) uses a 4-point Likert-type response format to measure symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Based on reports from parents and teachers, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) is used to assess emotional and behavioral issues. Trained psychologists conduct structured clinical interviews and observations to add context and quantitative data. When developmentally appropriate, self-reports are gathered, especially from older children.

### Data Analysis

Prevalence rates were determined using descriptive statistics, and the association between academic challenges and emotional distress was investigated using correlational analysis. To find subgroup differences, trends related to age and gender were also examined.

### Results

#### Sample Characteristics

- **Total participants:** 150 children
- **Age range:** 6–12 years
- **Gender distribution:** 88 boys (59%), 62 girls (41%)
- **Diagnostic criteria:** All met DSM-5 criteria for SLD
- **Assessment tools:** RCADS, CBCL, clinical observation, structured interviews

#### Prevalence of Emotional Disorders

- **Anxiety (clinical level):** 93 children (62%)
- **Depression (clinical level):** 72 children (48%)
- **Comorbid anxiety and depression:** 53 children (35%)

#### Mean RCADS Scores:

- Anxiety:  $M = 64.8$  ( $SD = 7.4$ ), nearing clinical threshold ( $\geq 65$ )
- Depression:  $M = 62.1$  ( $SD = 6.8$ ), nearing clinical threshold ( $\geq 60$ )
- CBCL Internalizing T-score:  $M = 65.2$  (clinical range  $\geq 65$ )

#### Depression symptoms (n = 72)

Symptoms	Prevalence
Persistent sadness	72%
Loss of interest in activities	65%
Low self esteem/self blame	59%
Irritability or anger outburst	34%
Sleep or appetite disturbances	26%



Type of Anxiety	Number of Children	Percentage (%)
Test/Performance Anxiety	54	58%
Social anxiety	38	41%
Generalized anxiety	20	22%

- A **significant positive correlation** was found between academic underachievement and emotional distress ( $r = 0.61, p < .01$ ).
- Children who experienced **repeated academic failure** scored higher on both RCADS and CBCL.
- **Strong family support** was associated with **lower emotional distress** (CBCL internalizing T-score: 58.4 vs. 66.2 in low-support environments).

#### Gender and Age Differences

Group	Observed Emotional Patterns
Girls (n = 62)	Higher sadness, social withdrawal, internalizing symptoms
Boys (n = 88)	More irritability, restlessness, externalizing behaviors
Age 6–9 years	Symptoms often reported by parents; limited self-awareness
Age 10–12 years	Greater self-awareness; verbalized emotional difficulties

#### Intervention Access

Just 15% (n = 23) reported having gotten emotional support or psychological counseling. The remaining 85% did not receive any organized mental health treatment; they were only receiving academic remediation.

#### Discussion

According to the study's findings, children with specific learning disorders are highly likely to experience emotional disturbances, particularly anxiety and depression. Notably, 48% of the participants displayed symptoms of depression, 35% had comorbid symptoms, and 62% had clinically significant levels of anxiety. These numbers are consistent with previous research indicating that children with SLD are more likely to develop internalizing disorders as a result of ongoing difficulties in school and inadequate social feedback (Terras et al., 2009; Kavale & Forness, 1996).

Academic underperformance and emotional distress were found to be significantly correlated, indicating that the psychological effects of SLD are not just incidental but rather entwined with academic functioning. As evidenced by higher RCADS and CBCL scores, children who experienced repeated academic failure also reported higher levels of frustration and lower self-worth in addition to stress related to school.

Boys tended to display more externalizing traits (such as irritability and agitation), while girls displayed more internalizing behaviors (such as sadness and withdrawal), which was in line with the

literature on developmental psychopathology. Additionally, older children (10–12 years old) showed more emotional difficulties, probably as a result of more complex social expectations and heightened cognitive awareness of their limitations.

There is a serious intervention gap, as only 15% of children had received psychological counselling. Academic remediation alone continues to be the primary focus in many educational settings today, ignoring the emotional and psychological needs of these children. These findings highlight the critical need for integrated intervention strategies that incorporate emotional and psychological support along with remedial education. In order to identify symptoms of anxiety and depression in children with SLD and refer them for the proper intervention, school systems and caregivers must receive training. All programs that focus on SLD should incorporate routine screening for emotional difficulties into their standard operating procedures.

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