

EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT IN ADOLESCENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Abstract: There are several internal and external or environmental factors highlighted in the literature, that interact with the presence of a learning disability in adolescents and impede their emotional adjustment. There are risk factors in their environment like family environment, loose family and community bonds, exposure to violence, peer pressure, availability of alcohol, drugs and other substances. The conflicting family, self, school and social expectations make them vulnerable to emotional and psychological morbidities. The constant presence of stressors and exposure to these risk factors for a long duration may have debilitating effect and consequences. (Garmezy, 1983; Maag, Irvin, Reid, & Vasa, 1994). Adolescents with learning disabilities are exposed to nearly the similar challenges in society as other children. However, the presence of a learning disability, combined with significant stressors in the family, school and community, dispose them to a greater risk for negative emotional outcomes. In addition to risk factors, presence of resiliency factors help adolescents with LD function well in society and prevent maladjustment. Identification of those factors and understanding their interaction remains a research task. The term adolescent is derived from the Latin word "adolescere" which literally means "to grow". It is a period when children become physically, psychologically, emotionally as well as socially matured (Hurlock .E.B. 1980, Santrock, Yussen, 1987, Verma, P. 1979, Musen& conger, 1990). School is a place where young people experiment with social roles and develop new aspects to their sense of self (Ingersoll G.M., 1989). Adolescence marks as one of the most vulnerable time of a child's development. Lack of self-awareness, low self-concept and esteem and presence of learning disabilities keep them from healthy adjustment and leave them with conflicting and self-defeating behaviour.

Keywords- Emotional Adjustment, Learning Disabilities, Risk Factors, Adolescence, Resilience

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND ADOLESCENCE: AN EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE DUO

According to Bender and Wall (1994), individuals with learning disabilities face a lot of psychological co morbidities like depression, loneliness etc. These aggravate the difficulties that are already risen by the condition of learning disabilities and produce negative results. (Weller, Watteyne, Herbert, &Crelly, 1994). Studies done by Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984) and Rutter (1979), throw light on the risk factors that influence the adjustment of individuals with learning disabilities. These risk factors include denial of disabling condition, parental conflict, violence, peer pressure, school adjustment and can affect the individual's emotional harmony. In Keogh and Weisner (1993) definition risk is "a potentially negative condition that impedes or threatens normal development". Common risk factors include temperament (Werner, 1986); developmental delay (Ramey et al., 1982; Werner & Smith, 1982); early antisocial behavior (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Walker, Stieber, & O'Neill, 1990); disturbed peer relationships (Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972); and biological/genetic factors (Garmezy, 1983). Chronic family discord (Rutter, 1979); and lack of social support for the child and the family (Sameroff & Seifer, 1990) clearly stand out as risk factors to healthy emotional adjustment.

School failure, school dropout and substance use are also a potential risk factors in adjustment as opined by (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989, Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989, Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992). In addition to risk factors, some supportive and protective factors have also been identified by researchers which imparts resilience and promoted adjustment. Garmezy and Masten (1991) defined resilience as a " the outcome of successful adaptation inspite of challenging and threatening circumstances" (p. 459). Zimmerman and Arunkumar (1994) described resilience as "those factors and processes that interrupt the trajectory from risk to problem behavior or psychopathology and thereby result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of challenging and threatening circumstances" (p. 4). Garmezy (1983) grouped the protective factors as child factors, family factors including supportive parents community factors. These include temperament, social competence, family bonding and support, positive relationships with significant adults and supportive school environments. Here it must be mentioned that despite many supportive and protective factors that have been identified, no one single factor is directly in correlation with emotional adjustment. Multiple and compounded factors are believed to affect this adjustment positively or negatively (Pellegrini, 1990, Rutter, 1979) It is the interaction of these factors with the environment hat produces effect on adjustment.(Garmezy et al., 1984; Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993).

Working on self-efficacy and esteem needs of an individual with learning disabilities acts as a resilience and support (Rutter, 1987). Children with learning disabilities become vulnerable to emotional problems in school environment and even home, due to their academic, language and number-based difficulties. Even the simple functions on numbers, basic operations, linguistics, semantics become difficult to process and express. Presence of supportive factors helps them stay resilient to such situations and help them spring back to their emotional and environmental harmony. These factors vary and are dependent on individual's age, gender, life-span stage and cultural framework in which she/he functions (Keogh & Weisner, 1993). The co-morbidity of emotional problems and their correlation with learning disabilities has been cited by several investigators (San Miguel, Forness,

&Kavale, 1996.) Adolescents with learning disabilities tend to score higher on scales of anxiety and depression than do their counterparts who do not have known disabilities (Epstein, Bursuck, & Cullinan, 1985; Gregg, Hoy, King, Moreland, & Jagota, 1992; Hall & Haws, 1989; Huntington & Bender, 1993; Margalit&Raviv, 1984, Hall & Haws, 1989; Maag& Behrens, 1989; Stevenson & Romney, 1984; Wright-Strawderman& Watson, 1988).

Self-awareness which is of the most important life skills which is considered an important resilient and supportive factor in LD adolescents. High self-esteem and self-concept also are supportive stands, and these vary among individuals with learning disabilities. High correlation has been found in self-esteem, anxiety and learning disability. Lower levels of anxiety are reported with higher levels of self-esteem. (Heyman, 1990: Kloomok&Cosden, 1994, Rothman &Cosden, 1995; Wilczenski, 1992, Patten, 1983, Stevenson & Romney, 1984). Researchers have found parents of LD adolescents having higher levels of anxiety, families more chaotic and conflicting (Margalit& Heiman, 1986, Kaslow& Cooper, 1978, Amerikaner&Omizo, 1984), Margalit&Almougy, 1991; Toro, Weissberg. Guare, &Liebenstein, 1990). Bryan, 1986 opined that low self esteem predisposed LD adolescents to substance abuse. According to the school failure hypothesis, students with learning disabilities are more likely than normally achieving peers to fail in school and develop a negative self-image, which, in turn, leads to school dropout and involvement in delinquent activity (Hawkins &Lishner, 1987). Having a learning disability in addition to social rejection and failure is more likely to develop into deep rooted anxiety and emotional difficulties and maladjustment. Poor social competence, delinquency, impulsiveness, inappropriate judgement, relationship difficulties, chemical dependency, substance abuse are seen as some of the indicators in maladjusted LD individuals. (Keilitz&Dunivant, 1986). Waldie and Spreen (1993, Larson, 1988; McConaughy& Ritter, 1986; Phihi&McLarnon, 1984, Kress and Elias (1993, Karacostas& Fisher, 1993)

CONCLUSION:

Deficit of emotional adjustment is seen in adolescents with learning disabilities. This stems from lack of life skills like self-awareness, low self-esteem, low self-concept, family discord, non-supportive school environment, substance abuse and inappropriate coping and problem-solving strategies among several other risk factors. These factors dispose learning disabled to emotional maladjustment and other psychological co-morbidities. Denial of disability, biological factors like temperament also exacerbate the difficulties already presented by the condition of learning disabilities. While risk factors dwell, there are certain protective, resilient and supportive factors like supportive environment in home and school, family supports, realistic expectations, appropriate intervention and coping strategies, high self-esteem, efficacy and life skills training that can help LD individuals to function well in their environment. This however, may vary as per their needs, age, gender, and their work and cultural contexts. The onus lies on us, the teaching and mental health fraternity, to identify risk and supportive factors, use and work on life skills, as per the individual needs to bring about healthy emotional adjustment. Such work will also create potential pathways for further research in this area to understand the interaction of these factors.

A FOOTNOTE TO THE READERS: This paper is a hands-on, research supported document that puts light on the effects of learning disability in emotional adjustment and well-being of adolescents. It is simply expressed to provide a good read even to a non-research-oriented person and at the same time hold attention to the subject. It is a drop in the ocean of mental health yet significant in youth and school mental health domain. Further, there is always a scope for improvement. Would conclude the paper with a belief that Knowledge is infinite, deep and limitless, and the only limits are the limits that we impose. Success perhaps is not the key to happiness, rather, happiness is the key to success. Let's make our inclusive youth happy and see a successful nation ahead.

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