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CHANGES IN MENTAL HEALTH IN ADOLESCENTS WITH A HISTORY OF SPECIFIC LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT

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Little is known about long-term mental health outcomes as individuals with specific language impairment (SLI) approach adulthood.

Aims: This longitudinal study examined anxiety (Child Manifest Anxiety Scale; CMAS) and depression (Moods and Feelings Questionnaire; MFQ) during the critical period when adolescents finish compulsory education and then embark upon their chosen course of study or employment.

Method: Eighty-nine adolescents with SLI and 90 typically developing (TD) peers were assessed during their final year of compulsory schooling (16 years) and one year later.

Results: At 16 years, there is a greater risk of both anxiety and depression in adolescents with SLI compared to their peers. Group scores for adolescents with SLI were significantly higher on both the CMAS ($p < .001$) and the MFQ ($p < .01$). However, while this finding is replicated at 17 years for anxiety symptoms ($p < .01$), there is a significant decrease in depressive symptoms for adolescents with SLI across time such that risk of depression is comparable to TD peers at 17 years. Scores for TD adolescents remain remarkably stable across this period. Poor mental health symptoms were not related to measures of nonverbal IQ, language, literacy or sociability but were associated with higher levels of shyness.

Conclusion: Notwithstanding a sustained, elevated risk of anxiety symptoms, there is an encouraging trend for a decrease in depressive symptoms as adolescents with SLI complete compulsory education. The findings are interpreted within a developmental psychopathology framework, focusing on the changing structure of intrapersonal and environmental processes that influence internalizing symptoms during mid-adolescence.