

# Mental health among children with and without reading difficulties: A literature review

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**Abstract:** The mental well-being of children is a critical factor that significantly influences their learning, social interactions, and ability to navigate everyday challenges. An examination of the factors impacting a child's mental health, particularly in cases where reading poses difficulties, reveals the necessity for a comprehensive approach that considers both their emotional state and educational experiences. Research indicates that children encountering learning difficulties are often more susceptible to emotional fluctuations and atypical behavioral changes; these challenges frequently hinder their academic achievements and social interactions. Longitudinal studies provide valuable insights into the complex trajectories of children's health and development, which in turn inform policies designed to safeguard mental wellness in vulnerable populations. Ultimately, these findings underscore the importance of mental health as a fundamental component of educational achievement and the overall well-being of children.

**Keywords:** mental health, children, reading difficulties.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many reading challenges aren't just about decoding words—they also make grasping meaning and using text for learning a tougher job for a child. In most cases, conditions like dyslexia seem to add extra weight to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, as several studies have shown. The mix of self-esteem, family support and a school's environment tend to make matters even messier. For instance, kids with dyslexia often face extra trouble when they feel unsafe at school, which in turn affects their overall mental well-being (1). Odd behaviors, such as changes in eating habits, can sometimes be a sign of broader developmental issues that are linked with these reading struggles (2). Generally speaking, it's important that future research digs a little deeper into these connections, looking at school experiences along with the wider social and emotional contexts that influence these children (3).

Children's mental wellbeing isn't straightforward – there are loads of factors that can throw young lives off balance. Take, for example, kids with neurodiverse profiles; they seem to suffer more often from anxiety and depression than their more typical peers, and there's a solid case for interventions like bibliotherapy, which appears to boost emotional health. It isn't only about that either – youngsters with hearing impairments face extra hurdles too, largely due to tricky relationship issues and rehabilitation challenges, as some recent reviews have noted. Then there are kids in care who, burdened by stubborn stigma, often find it hard to get the support they need. And when reading is a struggle, it tends to hit self-esteem hard and can lead to more acting out. In most cases, understanding how all these different pieces fit together is key to building the right kind of support (4,5).

Reading challenges and mental health issues often mix in ways that hit children overall well-being harder than we might first think. When a child struggles with reading, anxiety tends to spike and their confidence drops—a situation that can easily worsen any mental health problems already present, creating a kind of vicious cycle. Sometimes, kids end up pulling away from others because of the stigma attached to their reading struggles—this isolation mirrors what’s been seen in single-parent households facing socioeconomic pressures. There’s also the uneven access to mental health care among minority youth showing how demographic factors end up affecting both school performance and mental resilience. All in all, digging into these overlapping challenges helps us figure out better, more targeted support systems that boost both academic outcomes and overall mental well-being (6).

This review sets out several aims right from the start. Its main focus is to shine a light on the mental health differences seen between children who have reading difficulties and those who don’t – by carefully looking at various studies, it tries to tease out a mix of environmental, social and psychological factors behind these gaps. For example, one study (7) points out that social isolation can have a really strong effect on children already facing mental health issues, and, generally speaking, a similar look at reading problems might uncover even more hidden vulnerabilities. The review also takes a hard look at current interventions – research on school-based mental health programs suggests that educators and mental health professionals can pick up useful strategies here. In the end, this examination hopes, in many cases, to add a subtle depth to our understanding of the complex link between reading difficulties and mental wellbeing – a topic that, frankly, still hasn’t been fully untangled.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING READING DIFFICULTIES

Recognizing reading difficulties – dyslexia in particular – is key to grasping the broader picture of mental health struggles among children. Research generally shows that kids with dyslexia face a far higher risk of internal issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as external challenges like behavioral problems; these challenges are often worsened by a lack of strong coping strategies and insufficient support in the classroom (1). The emotional and social fallout from feeling excluded or not fully understanding their situation can, in many cases, intensify a children distress, sometimes even nudging them towards isolation, especially when their parents are also battling mental health issues (8). Meanwhile, the patchy and often fragmented nature of mental health services for children leaves clear gaps in the support systems designed for those with reading difficulties (9). All in all, a well-rounded understanding of these interlinked issues is crucial for devising targeted interventions that boost both reading abilities and overall mental well-being (10).

Kids who struggle with reading often find their challenges spill over into areas beyond just schoolwork, affecting their overall mental well-being. Dyslexia stands out as a prime example, with roughly 15 per cent of individuals facing obstacles that make reading, spelling, and writing a constant battle (11). This problem sometimes leads to a dip in self-esteem and a spike in anxiety, which in most cases can worsen issues like depression and behavioral troubles (1). At times, difficulty with understanding texts – a common hang-up with dyslexia – stops children from really connecting with what they read, thereby muddling both their learning experience and social life. Research generally points to the idea that a mix of factors, such as support from family and the type of schooling they receive, can shape the mental health struggles these children face (12). It seems clear, then, that future studies should take a closer look at the link between these social and emotional influences and the mental health concerns seen in dyslexic children, ultimately paving the way for more targeted interventions (13).

For many children, the act of reading can present significant challenges. This difficulty may stem from various factors, including limited exposure to reading materials, varying levels of literacy skills, or even learning disabilities (14). A jumble of brain-related and thinking factors can really throw a spanner in the works, affecting school life as well as how they feel on the inside. Some youngsters – take those with neurofibromatosis type 1 (NF1), for example – tend to struggle with matching up sounds and letters, a gap that might be at the root of their reading issues. These hurdles aren’t just about falling behind in class; they’re generally tied up with more frequent bouts of anxiety and even depression, as children wrestle with the ups and downs that come with these challenges. Creative fixes, like bibliotherapy, might offer a bit of comfort by bolstering emotional balance and, in most cases, easing some of the pressure linked to mental stress. All in all, keeping an eye on both the way kids process things and how they cope emotionally seems crucial if we’re going to tailor the right kind of help for each child facing such struggles.

Reading difficulties hit academic performance hard, often sparking a vicious cycle that upends both learning and mental well-being. Kids facing such challenges sometimes see their self-esteem take a nosedive and bouts of anxiety pick up, which only makes schoolwork grind even tougher. Research generally shows that if reading skills start slipping, you also tend to see more internalizing issues like anxiety and depression—so when the ability to read falters, emotional health isn't far behind. Long-term studies, in most cases, have found that a touch of depressive symptoms early on is linked with noticeable declines in academic achievement by the teenage years, particularly when it comes to numeracy and reading tasks. Things get even more tangled when you factor in parental mental health; a parent's own depressive mood can really muddle up the parent-child dynamic, thereby hindering the child's progress at school. Younger students, too, might wrestle with extra emotional hurdles, and this often leads to underperformance, further highlighting the intricate, if messy, interplay between reading issues and overall mental health. All in all, tackling reading difficulties at an early stage is key—not just for academic success but also for nurturing stronger mental resilience (15).

### 3. MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN CHILDREN WITH READING DIFFICULTIES

It's worrying that nearly one in five young people now wrestle with problems like anxiety and depression – issues that can turn into self-harm, suicidal behavior or other disruptive actions. Rather than following a neat order, we might notice that kids struggling with reading seem to feel this pressure all the more, their academic challenges piling on extra emotional strain. We can also see that child with neurodiverse profiles, generally speaking, tend to show higher risks of psychiatric troubles compared to their neurotypical mates. Oddly enough, even though there's plenty of evidence linking reading difficulties to these mental health challenges, effective interventions – say, bibliotherapy – often end up underused, leaving a clear gap in support measures. Early help is, in most cases, key; therefore, recognizing the impact of parental backing and the gentle nurturing of resilience becomes essential in lessening these issues over time(16) .

Reading difficulties in children seem closely tied to low self-esteem—a link that is both notable and, frankly, a bit troubling. Studies generally show that kids with dyslexia often end up with lower self-worth, mostly because they face a range of social obstacles in their everyday school environments. It turns out that having warm, supportive relationships can really make a difference; stable ties with parents, peers and teachers naturally boost a child's self-esteem. One can also observe that traits like being conscientious and having a sociable streak tend to influence the self-esteem of dyslexic adolescents—simply put, those who are more outgoing usually report feeling better about themselves. All in all, the impact of reading challenges stretches beyond just academic setbacks—it nudges us to consider a more rounded kind of help that builds up both a solid sense of self and healthier social connections (17,18).

Social isolation has become a growing worry for children's mental health—it touches on issues like reading difficulties and other broader challenges. Generally speaking, enforced isolation tends to ramp up loneliness, which can quickly lead to more anxiety and even depression, particularly among kids already grappling with mental health issues. It isn't always a straightforward link; for many children with neurodevelopmental disorders, the situation is even trickier since they often miss out on the everyday support and social contact from their peers. There's also evidence that the persistent stigma attached to mental health, when combined with isolation, may foster a sort of internalized shame that undermines overall wellbeing. All in all, tackling social isolation seems absolutely crucial if we're to develop effective interventions that support all children, especially those facing extra challenges (7).

Schools have a huge impact on mental wellbeing – and this is especially true for children who struggle with reading. We might find that programs like the Good Behavior Game, which aim to build a supportive class vibe, generally help kids feel better mentally; however, sometimes the benefits don't quite match expectations. In some cases, at-risk boys have even reported more bullying in these intervention setups. Then there's the whole COVID-19 situation: during lockdowns, we saw increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, which really highlighted how vulnerable some students are when they lack adequate social support in school environments. Emergency remote teaching, thrown in at a time of crisis, only made existing teaching and tech challenges worse – reminding us, rather plainly, that genuine human interaction and clear, structured support are irreplaceable for mental health. All in all, untangling the various layers of what happens in schools is crucial if we are to foster truly resilient mental health across the board, especially for those children facing extra learning difficulties (19,20).

Physical therapy intersects with people experiencing mental health disorders across a broad spectrum of diagnoses, covering a range of interventions with a small but growing evidence base. Exercise and physical activity studies dominated the highest levels of evidence and future focus, although economic evaluations and consumer-driven or patient experience studies are needed. There is a contrast between the confidence and knowledge of specialized physical therapists working within mental health settings and those in general practice settings. Inspiring, integrated education is required to further improve health care outcomes following physical therapy for people with mental health disorders or symptoms (21).

#### 4. MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN WITHOUT READING DIFFICULTIES

Kids who face no reading challenges might seem free from the academic pressures known to worsen mental health issues, yet they're not completely free of emotional struggles. In many cases, studies show that mental health problems can emerge in this group too, often owing to a mix of social and emotional influences. Take internalizing disorders – think anxiety and depression – as an example; research generally suggests that nearly 18.4% of children across Europe experience these issues, which tells us that such challenges are common regardless of school performance. Externalizing problems, although found less often, still affect around 7.8% of youngsters, pointing to a broad spectrum of mental health needs that simply cannot be overlooked. All in all, it seems clear that mental health support should be all-embracing, aiming to help every child rather than just those with reading difficulties, and thus fostering an environment that truly supports emotional well-being (22).

Children's mental health is a tangled issue these days, one that really calls for a closer, less formulaic look. There's ample evidence suggesting that kids are facing all sorts of challenges – anxiety, bouts of low mood, and even unpredictable behavior – with these issues often being made worse by influences at home, in schools, and out in the neighborhood. It's been noted, in most cases, that youngsters from various backgrounds, particularly those with neurodiverse traits, seem to pick up extra risks compared to their more typical mates. A few studies even hint that child dealing with conditions like facial palsy or who show borderline intellectual performance tend to struggle with social and emotional adjustments, each with a different level of ability to bounce back. And then there's the striking shortfall in custom-made support – especially for methods like bibliotherapy that haven't received much attention – which clearly underlines the pressing need for carefully tailored strategies to ease these disparities in mental well-being among the wider child population (23,24).

Various factors shape the mental health of children without reading difficulties, and if you think about it, things aren't always cut-and-dried. A solid, supportive family life – the kind where kids feel genuinely cared for – seems to boost their ability to handle everyday social pressures and friendships; studies generally show that children from stable homes tend to keep their emotions in check better, which, in most cases, means they're less likely to fall into problems like anxiety and depression. It's also worth noting that getting involved in creative pursuits – say, expressive arts therapies – can help a child find their voice and keep their spirits up; in other words, such approaches might just work well for a wide range of young people, including those with neurodiverse profiles. Then again, factors like a lower socioeconomic background can add plenty of stress, directly affecting mental well-being and signaling that we might need more tailored mental health support services. All in all, understanding and addressing these mixed influences seems pretty key to supporting the overall mental well-being of children without reading difficulties (25).

Kids who struggle with reading often end up with lower self-esteem, a reality that's sparked a fair bit of discussion in child mental health circles. Dyslexic youngsters, for instance, tend to face challenges that go beyond mere literacy—they often battle a fragile sense of self and experience extra emotional ups and downs. Research generally indicates that these feelings of low self-worth show up as both outward acting and internal struggles, usually made worse by bullying and difficulties in keeping emotions in check. Life, in many cases, seems noticeably less fulfilling across different areas for children coping with mental health issues, not least when reading challenges are in the picture, which then chips away at their overall sense of value. Some evidence even hints that such children might end up internalizing a stigma, a self-stigmatization that leads them to hide their difficulties and, in doing so, further isolates them from the support they so badly need. Figuring out these tangled emotional dynamics is pretty important if we're to help these vulnerable young ones address their self-esteem deficits while taking into account the unique challenges they face (26,27).

Supportive settings can make a huge difference for children, especially those who have trouble with reading. It's clear that having a kind atmosphere goes a long way in lessening the stigma that so often tags mental health issues—one study even noted that young people from care backgrounds reckon that a more flexible, compassionate way of talking about mental

health really does count. In schools, where boosting well-being is as important as getting good grades, the focus tends to lean more towards academic success rather than early emotional support, so chances to intervene early are often lost. There's also a pretty strong link between how well kids do at school and their mental state, with those facing emotional challenges being generally more likely to drop out or repeat a year. I'd say that mixing mental health lessons into the everyday curriculum might just bridge that gap between what we already know and the kind of support our youngsters truly need, ultimately lifting their overall mental well-being (28).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Reviewing a wide range of studies on children's mental health – whether or not they have reading difficulties – one quickly sees that a mix of strategies is absolutely needed. Kids who struggle with reading often end up dealing with extra mental strain, like bouts of anxiety and depression, which clearly shows why early and tailor-made support is so important. The views coming from these children and even their carers point to a real need for support systems that blend both psychological help and educational input. Given that, in most cases, nearly 20% of children seem to be wrestling with serious mental health issues, it appears that the educational and healthcare sectors must work together to boost resources and improve training. In the end, grasping how these problems are intertwined is key to nurturing resilience and promoting overall wellbeing among all children (16,29).

A recent literature review brings to light some key findings on children's mental health alongside their reading challenges – or lack thereof – and reveals a mix of disparities and underlying factors that shape their day-to-day experiences. One study, for example, suggests that deaf children often seem to face extra mental health hurdles compared to their hearing peers, with relationship issues popping up as a significant risk factor for them. At the same time, there's evidence that children with reading difficulties are generally more prone to both internalizing and externalizing problems; in many cases, however, a decent dose of self-esteem can help dial down these issues a bit. A systematic review, in most cases, shows that the stigma around mental health tends to hold young people back from seeking help—a notable barrier to treatment that seems to crop up across various diagnoses. Moreover, bibliotherapy, though still relatively unexplored, appears to hold some promise for boosting emotional well-being, especially among children with neurodiverse profiles. All in all, these findings hint at a rather tangled interplay of factors affecting mental health across different groups of children (27).

School success often hinges on how well students feel, so teachers and mental health pros really need to team up—especially when kids find reading hard. Plenty of studies point out that trauma can throw a child's thinking and feelings off balance, a fact that generally nudges us to rethink usual classroom methods. Mental health experts are usually on the lookout for early warning signs, stepping in promptly to help with the hefty emotional and behavioral challenges that many youngsters face. At the same time, teachers handle this support in different ways, sometimes just chatting with pupils or even blending these concerns right into their lessons. Still, a fair bit of skepticism hangs over how well these services actually work, suggesting that more tailored training might be needed to give educators the right tools and a boost of confidence. In the end, dealing with these facets could help mold a school environment that's both more welcoming and better tuned to every student's mental health needs (30).

Current studies point to a clear link between children's reading struggles and their mental health; generally speaking, this nudges us to pursue research that fills some pretty important gaps. It also seems that long-term studies, which tease apart the tangled ties between language skills, reading comprehension and emotional wellbeing, are absolutely vital given just how complex these relationships are. Drawing on insights from adult safeguarding reviews, upcoming research should arguably work on building broad frameworks so that effective policies can gradually be woven into everyday practice, ultimately making a real difference in mental health interventions. Lastly, utilizing digital platforms might just improve the way we collect data and boost its accessibility, matching up well with today's research needs (31).

Wrapping up our chat on children's mental health, it's clear that these issues hit a broad spectrum of young people—even those dealing with reading challenges. Many youngsters tend to show signs of mental struggles early on; in many cases, a fair number end up wrestling with anxiety and depression. Schools – especially those running specific mental health programs – often turn out to be the first stop for spotting early signs and stepping in, which, in most cases, builds resilience and supports overall well-being. By weaving mental health training into school settings, we help ensure that every professional is ready to support children, reminding us of our ethical duty to stand by mental health awareness and advocacy (28).



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