

# research snapshot

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## Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Youth With ASD and How They Relate to Mothers' Mental Health

### What is this research about?

Some children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have behavioural and emotional problems, and many also have an intellectual disability. These mental health problems can seriously impact mothers' mental health. Studies typically do not examine how autism and intellectual disability separately increase the chances of children also having emotional or behavioural problems, and their mothers having mental health issues. Studies of behavioural and emotional problems in children with ASD usually include participants who are referred from clinical services, so they may not provide an accurate snapshot of what is going on in the community. The current research study addressed these limitations by examining how ASD and intellectual disability can contribute to behavioural and emotional problems and maternal mental health problems for participants who were recruited from the general population.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data from a national survey of 5-16 year olds in the UK. A total of 18,415 children and adolescents participated in the national survey. Researchers used information from the children's mothers and teachers to identify 641 children with an intellectual disability.

### What you need to know:

ASD and intellectual disability both increase the likelihood that a child will develop behavioural and emotional problems. Mothers of children with ASD may be at particular risk of developing mental health problems.

Researchers used a clinical assessment to identify 98 children with an ASD. Mothers completed questionnaires about their child's behavioural and emotional problems and their own mental health.

### What did the researchers find?

The presence of an intellectual disability increased the likelihood of a child having behavioural and emotional problems. The presence of an ASD increased the likelihood of a child having behavioural and emotional problems even more than the presence of an intellectual disability. Mothers of children with ASD (with and without intellectual disability) were more likely to have mental health problems, compared to mothers of children with intellectual disabilities or mothers of children without disabilities. Child behaviour problems were related to mothers' mental health problems.

### How can you use this research?

Clinicians should look for elevated behavioural or emotional problems in children with a diagnosis of ASD or intellectual disability, because these problems can be related to their mothers' mental health, and need to be addressed. Children with ASD, regardless of whether they have an intellectual disability or not, are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems, so it is particularly important to keep watch over how they are doing and to target problems early before they become severe.

### About the Researcher

Dr. Vasiliki Totsika is a research officer with the School of Psychology at Bangor University. Her research interests are the area of intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders.

### Citation

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### Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Mental health, Mothers, Children

This research summary was written by Jennifer MacMullin for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at [asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries](http://asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries)

### About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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