

# research snapshot

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## Mental Health Problems in Youth with Severe Intellectual Disability

### What is this research about?

Mental health problems are common in youth with intellectual disabilities. Past research has shown that a combination of individual factors, such as a child's age, sex, and daily living skills, along with family and environmental factors, like parent mental health, family financial status, stressful life events, and family functioning are associated with the development of mental health problems in these youth. However, most of the research so far has focused on youth with mild or moderate levels of intellectual disability and we know very little about those with more severe levels. This study aimed to identify characteristics that were associated with mental health problems in youth with severe intellectual disability.

### What did the researchers do?

This study was part of the Great Outcomes for Kids Impacted by Severe Developmental Disabilities (GO4KIDDS) research program, which focused on the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of school-aged children in Canada with severe developmental disabilities and their families. For this study, the researchers surveyed 141 parents of youth with severe or profound levels of intellectual disability from across Canada. Youth were 4 to 18 years of age and 39% had autism. Parents completed a survey that asked questions about their child

### What you need to know:

Youth with severe and profound intellectual disability who have greater daily living skills and experience stressors, like negative life events or poor family functioning, are more likely to have mental health problems as compared to youth with lower daily living skills and those without these stressors.

and family, including stressful life events, family quality of life, and their own mental health.

### What did the researchers find?

Youth with a diagnosed mental health condition had greater daily living skills but experienced more stressful life events than youth without a mental health condition. Specifically, youth with a diagnosed mental health condition were more likely than those without to have had a family member experience a serious illness or injury, housing problems, a parent with a drug/alcohol problem, entered a new school, been suspended/expelled from school, and gone through a difficult transition in the last year.

When looking at youth with serious behaviour problems, those with behaviour problems had greater daily living skills but lower family quality of life and were more likely to have parents with mental health problems compared to youth without serious behaviour problems.



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The researchers did not find any relationship between child age, sex, autism diagnosis, and financial hardship with whether or not youth had any mental health or serious behaviour problems. However, they caution that their sample size was relatively small, and future research is needed with larger samples.

## How can you use this research?

Youth with severe and profound intellectual disability need supports that go beyond just the child, because their families and larger environments also play important roles in their mental health and wellbeing. Child and family-based interventions, along with policies that address larger systemic issues, are needed to promote mental health.

## About the Researchers

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## Citation

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## Keywords

intellectual disability, youth, mental health, stressors

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