

Study links mental health to poor school results

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Credit: University of Western Australia

A national survey led by The University of Western Australia has painted a bleak picture of the effect of mental disorders on Australia's school students with the results revealing poorer academic outcomes, more absences from school and more likelihood of self-harm.

The survey, conducted at the Telethon Kids Institute by Dr. David Lawrence from UWA's Graduate School of Education, analysed educational outcomes from Young Minds Matter: the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Dr. Lawrence said the survey looked at the impact of [mental health](#) problems on attendance, engagement and performance at school.

"It is based on the Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, for which we interviewed over 6,000 families from across the country to see how their kids were doing," Dr. Lawrence said.

The survey found mental [disorders](#) affected one in seven students in the previous 12 months and

students with mental disorders scored lower on average than students without mental disorders in every test domain and year level.

Students with a mental disorder in Year 3 were, on average, seven to 11 months behind students with no mental disorder but by Year 9 they were an average 1.5 to 2.8 years behind.

Dr. Lawrence said students in Years 1-6 with a mental disorder missed an average 12 days per year compared with eight days per year for students without a mental disorder. In Years 7-12 students with a mental disorder missed an average 24 days per year compared with 11 days per year for those without mental disorders.

"What we also found was that about one in 10 (11.1 per cent) students reported having self-harmed at some point in their life with around one in 12 (8.4 per cent) saying they had self-harmed in the previous 12 months," he said.

"However, the students had the option of not answering the questions on self-harm and about five per cent took this option, which means that the number of young people who have ever self-harmed could be higher than indicated in our survey."

Dr. Lawrence said the results of the [survey](#) highlighted the need for specific measures to better support the academic performance of students with mental disorders.

"Given many mental disorders including ADHD and anxiety start early in life and persist for many years, we need to improve early childhood interventions as a way to close initial gaps in academic performance between students with and without a [mental disorder](#)," he said.

"There's a need to improve the effectiveness of interventions to reduce the prevalence of mental

disorders in children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and to improve the effectiveness of programs to help students.

Ben Goodsell, senior researcher on the project, said the current systems in schools were not always able to meet the demand.

"Regular evaluation and continual improvement of mental health support programs should be implemented and school counsellors should be given more support to expand their services," he said.

"Teachers are not [mental health professionals](#) and should not be expected to diagnose and treat mental disorders."

He said working with [school](#) communities would be a challenging but rewarding task.

"We really need to get this information out to schools. Making that connection with the community, listening to their needs, and helping them to build support networks to meet the demand will be crucial."

Provided by University of Western Australia

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