

Childhood ills linked to lifelong woes

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Young children prone to ear infections and allergies appear at a higher risk of developing reading troubles in their elementary school years, according to groundbreaking research.

Left unchecked, that can lead to learning disabilities, which typically result in disadvantages throughout life, from poorer overall physical and mental health, an increased likelihood of living with parents longer as adults, and lower incomes than other Canadians.

In the first ever snapshot of the impact of living with a learning disability in Canada, the study found that problems early in childhood compound as a person ages, affecting school, work, relationships and leading to depression and chronic illness.

But authors of the study, to be released today, say it doesn't have to be this way. They call for a broader societal approach to dealing with learning disabilities, including mandatory early screening for children aged 4 to 8, publicly funded support through provincial health insurance plans, more awareness and training among medical, mental health and educational professionals and raising awareness of employers to offering accommodations to their workers.

"These people are not less motivated in learning but have a real impairment that's taking place and having a longer-term impact on their lives," said co-author Alexander Wilson, director of the Meighen Centre at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, which works with learning disabled students.

"We have to get away from thinking of this as an education problem," he said. "We need to make a systemic change and look at

this across a person's lifespan and involve more agencies in their care and support."

Defined as any one of a number of disorders affecting the way someone takes in, stores and uses information – such as dyslexia (reading), dysgraphia (writing), dyscalculia (mathematics) or dyspraxia (fine motor skills) – learning disabilities affect individuals with at least average intelligence.

The study – "Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities" – examined 20 years of Statistics Canada reports looking at key areas of a person's life, including, education, employment, social relationships, family, health and finance to develop indicators of how a learning disabled person compares with the general population.

It supplemented that research with a dozen focus groups across the country that included the often heart-breaking experiences of adults with learning disabilities, the parents of children who have them, and learning disabled kids aged 10 to 14.

Among the study's findings:

- About 40 per cent of children who were identified with learning disabilities at age 7 were prone to ear infections and allergies at age 3, underscoring the need for early learning disability screening. Up to 85 per cent of learning disabled people also have a reading disability.
- Two-thirds of learning disabled kids had reduced extracurricular activities because of it.
- One-third of kids who need aids – such as tutors and computer programs – lack them.
- Some 28 per cent of those in their 20s with learning disabilities have not completed high school, nearly double the rate in general population.
- Just over half of learning disabled adults aged 30 to 44 are working, compared to nearly 90 per cent of the total population.
- Learning disabled adults are two to three times more likely to report "fair to poor" physical, general and mental health than Canadians in general.

“These are people who suffer in silence because there's such a stigma – children who feel they are dumb, adults who've always been told they should shake their heads and get over it,” said Judy Kerr, executive director of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, which spearheaded the \$300,000, three-year federally funded study.

The mother of twin 13-year-old sons with learning disabilities, Kerr said she considers her family “incredibly lucky.” They pay a student to tutor their boys, who have been at the same Ottawa-area school since kindergarten, where they are thriving.

But so many others have never been properly diagnosed or never received the help they need to succeed, resulting in personal and societal costs, Kerr said.

The study is available online at www.pacfold.ca. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada website (www.ldac.ca) offers links to many resources.