

## **Difference between the Level of Anxiety and Self-esteem in Children With and Without Learning Difficulties in Peshawar, Pakistan**

**Fozia Shah\* and Erum Irshad**

Department of Psychology, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

The present research examined difference between level of anxiety and self-esteem in children with and without learning difficulties. A sample of 100 students (N=100), 50 with learning difficulties (n=50) and 50 without learning difficulties (n=50) was taken from different public and private schools of Peshawar city. Their age range was between 6 to 11 years, which includes children of primary level classes. It was hypothesized that children with learning difficulties will have higher level of anxiety as compared to children without learning difficulties. It was also assumed that children with learning difficulties will have lower levels of self-esteem as compared to children without learning difficulties. Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety scale (RCMAS) and Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory (CSI) were administered to obtain the data. Independent samples t-test was applied to find out the difference between the scores of the two groups. The results supported the hypotheses and indicated that children with learning difficulties have higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem as compared to children without learning difficulties.

*Keywords:* Anxiety, self-esteem, learning difficulties

A learning difficulties sufferer faces several issues while processing particular information. Unlike 'learning disability', learning difficulty is a term that has no direct impact on general intelligence/ IQ. It is also possible that an individual may suffer from

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\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fozia Shah, Department of Psychology, University of Peshawar, Pakistan.  
E-mail: foziashah11@gmail.com

more than one learning difficulty, which could include difficulties such as dyspraxia and dyslexia along with subsequent conditions. Learning difficulties include a range of disorders affecting the mental processes that work with the information. The children who face learning difficulties have trouble understanding certain concepts. Subsequently, they have issues with learning in school which has no link with their intelligence. For instance they would face problems in writing, reading, reasoning, listening, mathematics and speaking. Additionally, children who face learning difficulties may feel frustrated and restless when these skills are demanded from them in school. Moreover they may lose focus during lessons and also show behavioral issues including lack of self-control and the ability to socialize with people.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the level of anxiety and self-esteem in children who have learning difficulties. There have been several studies that have highlighted levels of anxiety and self-esteem in children with learning disabilities; however this research presents the concept of learning difficulty in a typical manner. Therefore, there are few people who can be adequately defined using the concept of learning difficulties while avoiding any stereotypes of their being disabled or not having the ability to learn.

On the other hand there have been several studies on learning disabilities and learning disorders where the term disorder refers to the problems of learning in the academic field that are not serious enough to warrant a diagnosis; whereas learning disability is the official diagnosis that includes a specific criteria that is identified by a professional pediatrician or a psychologist. Learning disability and learning difficulty have a slight difference between the frequency and the intensity of the symptoms and problems that are reported; therefore this study does not confuse the terms and explores the issues of the children who have difficulties in learning. Learning difficulty includes emotional and learning issues that affect a person's ability to learn and cope with peers, while following a convention. Learning disability explains the lifelong condition that is initiated before childhood, affecting the developmental process and which requires formal help to learn skills, cope independently

and understand information. Hence this study only focuses on children with learning difficulties that will give a new perspective to the level of anxiety and self-esteem between primary level students.

### **Learning Difficulties and Anxiety**

Children with learning difficulties may face anxiety. For instance Margalit and Zak (1984) proposed that children with learning difficulties show higher levels of anxiety than their peers without difficulties. They more often feel that events in their surrounding are beyond their control. Frequent somatic complaints are made by students who have increased levels of anxiety due to learning difficulties (Margalit & Raviv, 1984).

A challenging behavior to cope with learning difficulties has been known to become a cause of anxiety and distress in children with learning difficulties (Menolascino, 1977). In general population, 5% of individuals constitute learning difficulties. They are more likely to have psychological disorders as compared to those who are without learning difficulties (Borthwick-Duffy, 1994).

Researches also show evidence that anxiety disorders do occur in individuals with learning difficulties. Especially in children with learning difficulties it is very common to have troubles in schools that may lead to anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). Children become fearful because of confusion and constant frustration in school. They face failure and entering new situations is extremely anxiety provoking for them. This avoidance behavior is misinterpreted by the teachers and parents as laziness (Ryan, 1994).

Paget and Reynolds (1984) found that children aged 6-17 years old, with learning difficulties have higher levels of anxiety than their peers without learning difficulties; anxiety was found in them in the form of concentration difficulties. Casey, Levy, Brown, and Brooks-Gunn (1992) found that the score of positive wellbeing was lower in children with learning difficulties and those children

were found more anxious and more unhappy than their peer without learning difficulties, and even their peers were aware of their learning difficulties. In a research review of adolescents with learning difficulties, Huntington and Bender (1993) concluded that high levels of anxiety are experienced by adolescents with learning difficulties than their peers. Willcutt and Pennington (2000) examined a sample of learning difficulties twins and found psychiatric difficulties in them. It was found that those children who have reading difficulties have high levels of anxiety in them, but contrary to conduct disorders and hyperactivity, which was not high in twins. These findings suggest that anxiety levels occur as a result of difficulties in literacy and are not caused by the genetic and environmental influence common to the twins.

Sharma and Pandey (1992) conducted a research on individuals with learning difficulty and found a significant difference in anxiety levels on age variable but no significant difference on gender variable. Fletcher (2009) has conducted a research to investigate the association between anxiety and reading difficulty in boys and girls. It was found that there was no significant difference in the overall level of anxiety in both the genders. Due to the feelings of failure and frustration, individuals with learning difficulty learn that they are inferior to others, and that their efforts can make little difference.

### **Learning Difficulties and Low Self- Esteem**

Sabronie (1994) found that students who have learning difficulties have poor self-concept regarding school functioning. Other researchers have found that students as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> graders with learning difficulties show negative academic self-concept that is generalized from low self-esteem (Heibert, Wong, & Hunter, 1982). Hughes and Baker (1990) proposed that those children who experienced humiliation, rejection and failure generally have low self-worth. This can have a great effect on their academic self-concept and over all self-esteem.

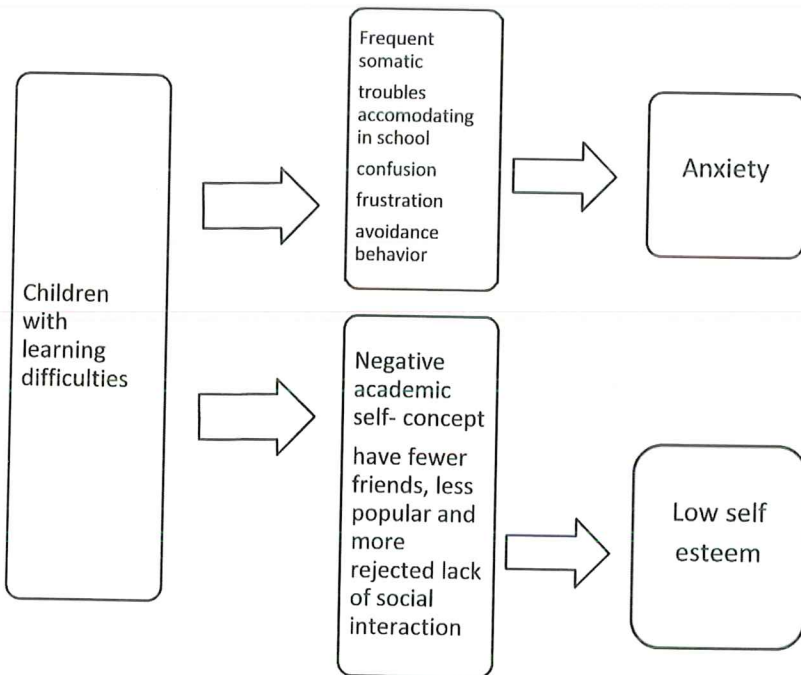
Those children who have learning difficulties have fewer friends, are less popular and face more rejection. They are found to be more aggressive and face difficulties in building a positive interpersonal relationship which affects their self-esteem (Matsuo, 1997). Apart from difficulty in social interaction, children with learning difficulties get frustrated due to poor academic performance, failure and negative remarks by the teachers and parents; all of this frustration further lowers a child's self-esteem.

Students with learning difficulties have demonstrated lower self-esteem than their peers without learning difficulty (Möller, Streblov, & Pohlmann, 2009). Students with learning difficulties believe that it is important to have academic skills to raise their self-esteem (Cosden, Elliott, Noble, & Kelemen, 1999). Harter (1983) discovered that the self-perceptions of children with learning problems are negative as compared to those without learning difficulties. Baer et al. (2002) found that children with learning difficulties observe their academic ability as less favorable when compared to children without learning difficulties.

Therefore, it is evident from the literature that children with learning difficulties have social adjustment problems, depression, withdrawal, low self-worth, frustration, shyness and poor academic performance. In accordance with these findings, this study attempts to find if children with learning difficulties have higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem as compared to those who are without learning difficulties. Chaudhary and Jyoti (2015) studied the levels of anxiety and depression between the children who have learning disabilities. The study further compared the normal/ able children and LD children of Ahmedabad aged 12 to 15 years. The study measured the anxiety level using Hamilton Anxiety Test and level of depression was measured using PHD-9 (Patients Health Questionnaire). The study found significant differences between the anxiety and depression levels of LD and able children. It was concluded that depression levels were significantly higher in LD children.

A similar study has been conducted by Hamid (2015) through a descriptive statistic method based on a sample of 50 children suffering from learning difficulties in Saudi Arabia Jazan King. The study used an emotional and behavioral problem scale to assess the issues of the LD children. The study found emotional and behavioral issues such as poor concentration, thinking issues, lack of activity, attention deficit, lack of self-confidence, lack of interaction, sadness, aggression etc. Keeping in view the literature review, the following theoretical model for the present study is proposed.

### Theoretical Model



### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were formulated:

- i) Children with learning difficulties will have higher levels of anxiety as compared to children without learning difficulties.
- ii) Children with learning difficulties will have lower levels of self-esteem as compared to children without learning difficulties.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The sample comprised of 300 school children, ranging in age from 6 to 11 years selected through simple random sampling technique from different private and public schools in Peshawar city. Total six English medium schools were randomly selected. School administration was informed and the purpose of the research was explained to them. In phase one, the demographic information of enrolled students of class 2, 3, and 4 were collected. Then children with learning difficulties, both genders, were identified through a screening check list. Those who scored low on the screening check list were selected for phase two. In phase two the sample consisted of 50 children with learning difficulties (n=25 boys & n=25 girls) and 50 children without learning difficulties (n=25 boys and 25 girls). The 50 children selected were aged between 6 to 11 years old.

#### **Measures**

##### **Screening Check List for Specific Learning Difficulties**

It consists of 24 most common presenting symptoms of learning difficulties which helps in assessing the children with learning difficulties (Irshad, 2006).

##### **The Revised Children Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS)**

The RCMAS is a 37-item self-assessment inventory used to measure anxiety in children, for clinical purposes (evaluation, diagnosis and treatment), education and research purposes. The RCMAS consists of 28 anxiety items. It has three anxiety subscales i.e. Physiological Anxiety, Worry / Oversensitivity, Social

Concern/Concentration and 9 Lie (social desirability) items. Each item is supposed to embody a feeling or an action that reflects an aspect of anxiety, hence the subtitle, "What I think and feel". It is a relatively brief instrument, which has been submitted to an in-depth study to ensure that it is psychometrically sophisticated and sound. However, it is also recommended that the RCMAS can only be used as part of a full clinical assessment then diagnose and treat anxiety of the child. Relatively high Cronbach's alpha scores for the total anxiety Scale ( $\alpha = .80$  range) have been reported (Gerard & Reynolds, 1999).

### **Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory**

Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory (1967) is a 58-item measure of attitudes towards oneself. The inventory was originally designed to measure self-esteem of the children. However, it was revised by Ryden (1978) for use on adults. For each item, the participants respond that the statement provided is "like me" or "unlike me". The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for Coopersmith Self-esteem inventory is  $\alpha = .86$  (Johnson, Redfield, Miller, & Simpson, 1983).

### **Procedure**

The purpose of the study was to assess the difference between the level of anxiety and self-esteem in children with and without learning difficulties. To achieve the purpose, permission was taken from different private and public schools in Peshawar city. After showing their willingness, nature of the research was discussed with the class teacher of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. In phase one of the study different public and private schools were approached and (n=300) students were assessed to get the desired sample of children with learning difficulties (n=50). With the cooperation of the class teachers the demographic information was collected and teachers were given a screening check list to assess the students. Those who responded yes to twelve or more than twelve items were identified as children with learning difficulties. In phase two, 50 students (n=25 boys & n=25 girls) who scored low on screening check lists were individually approached.



Rapport was developed with each student and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Before administering the scale each item was very well explained to them. After that an anxiety scale was administered and then the self-esteem scale was administered. To differentiate the level of anxiety and self-esteem in children with learning difficulties, a similar procedure was adopted with 50 children without learning difficulties (boys & girls). In the end, the school administration and participants were thanked for their cooperation.

### **Operational Definitions of Variables**

#### **Anxiety**

Anxiety is a universal human experience. It is a painful emotion consisting of psychological and somatic manifestation and hyper arousal. Most often it is accompanied by behavioral reactions. Hoen-Saric, Borkovec, and Nemiah (1995) found that at an optimal level, it is normal as it motivates a person to accomplish tasks and to cope with the situation. Yerkes and Dodson (1906) found that there is a difference between fear and anxiety, fear is a targeted and direct response to specific events or objects that a person is aware of. Anxiety can also be defined as fearful anticipation of future anger or misfortune accompanied by a feeling of dysphasia or somatic symptoms of tension. The level of anxiety in this study is the score of a subject on Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale. Scores of 0 to 19 indicate low anxiety level; whereas scores of 20 to 37 indicate high anxiety level.

#### **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is considered a positive or negative perception or view about one's self (Hodgson, Hoover, Kumpf, & Williams, 2004). Self-esteem is one's judgment about their self-concept. The term "self-concept" refers to the attributes one has (McEachron, 1993). Self-esteem is also defined as feeling better about one's self (Pierangelo, 2004). Those people whose self-esteem is high, are easy risk takers than those with low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is manifested in many different ways such as lack of confidence, depression and withdrawal. Anger and frustration are expressed by

many people because they cannot complete certain tasks efficiently or easily and the result is low self-esteem (Richard, 2005).

Level of self-esteem, in this study is indicated by the score of subject on Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory. Scores between the ranges of 0 to 29 indicate high self-esteem whereas scores between the ranges of 30 to 58 indicate low self-esteem.

### Results

The purpose of the present research was to assess the difference between the levels of anxiety and self-esteem in children with and without learning difficulties and also to assess the differences in the level of anxiety and self-esteem in boys and girls with learning difficulties. To analyze the results independent samples t-test was conducted with the help of SPSS version 16 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

**Table 1**

*Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Value of Level of Anxiety in Children With and Without Learning Difficulties (N= 100)*

Subject	N	M	SD	t	P
Learning difficulty	50	29.54	3.17	25.50	0.00*
Non Learning difficulty	50	10.02	4.38		

\*P<.05

The above table shows highly significant difference (P<0.05) between children with and without learning difficulties. The scores showed that children with learning difficulties have higher levels of anxiety as compared to the children without learning difficulties.

**Table 2**

*Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Value of Level of Self-Esteem in Children With and Without Learning Difficulties (N= 100)*

Subject	N	M	SD	t	p
Learning difficulty	50	46.24	5.69	25.52	0.00*
Non Learning difficulty	50	14.34	6.760		

\*P<.05

The above table shows highly significant difference ( $P < 0.05$ ) between children with and without learning difficulties which suggests that children with learning difficulties have lower levels of self-esteem as compared to the children without learning difficulties.

**Table 3**

*Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Value of Level of Anxiety in Boys and Girls with Learning Difficulties (N=50)*

Subject	N	M	SD	t	p
Boys	25	29.76	3.35	0.48	0.62
Girls	25	29.32	3.03		

The above table shows non-significant difference ( $P > 0.05$ ) in the level of anxiety between boys and girls with learning difficulties.

**Table 4**

*Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Value of Level of Self-Esteem in Boys and Girls with Learning Difficulties (N=50)*

Subject	N	M	SD	t	p
Boys	25	46.56	5.46	0.69	0.49
Girls	25	44.80	3.11		

The above table shows non-significant difference ( $P > 0.05$ ) in the levels of self-esteem between boys and girls with learning difficulties.

### Discussion

The study was conducted to explore the difference between levels of anxiety and self-esteem in children with and without learning difficulties. The level of anxiety was assessed with the help of "Revised Children Manifest Anxiety Scale". The value of alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=0.945$ ) indicates that the scale is reliable enough to assess the anxiety levels of children. The level of self-esteem was assessed with the help of Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory. The value of alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=0.969$ ) indicates that the scale is reliable to assess the self-esteem of children.

The results of the study demonstrated that anxiety level is high among children with learning difficulties as compared to children without learning difficulties ( $t = 25.502, p < .05$ ) as shown in Table 1. The mean difference between the scores of children with and without learning difficulties on Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety scale is highly significant ( $P < .05$ ), thus strongly supports the hypothesis i.e. children with learning difficulties will have higher level of anxiety as compared to children without learning difficulties.

Individuals suffering from learning difficulties are more likely to have anxiety disorders (Bradley, Fuller, Healey, & Hall, 2004). Casey, Levy, Brown, and Brooks-Gunn (1992) found that the score of positive well-being was lower in children with learning difficulties and those children were found more anxious and more unhappy than their peers without learning difficulties.

Due to learning difficulties, children may not only become anxious but also may develop low self-esteem. Brook (2001) found that children with learning difficulties have low self-esteem and considered themselves helpless in learning, have poor decision making power, low tolerance level for frustration and exhibit adjustment problems with peers.

Chapman (2002) found that children with learning difficulties have lower levels of self-esteem as compared to their peers without learning difficulties. Harter (1983) found that the self-perception of those children who have learning difficulties was low as compared to those who were without learning difficulties.

The findings of the present study did find differences between the self-esteem of the children with and without learning difficulties. The results indicated that children with learning difficulties showed significantly lower levels of self-esteem as compared to children without learning difficulties, ( $t = 2.526$ ,  $P < .05$ ) as shown in Table 2; thus firmly supporting the hypothesis that Children with learning difficulties will have lower level of self-esteem as compared to children without learning difficulties.

Learning difficulty is a neurological disorder. It occurs in males as well as in females and can cause anxiety. Badian (1984) conducted a longitudinal study on manifestation of anxiety in students with learning difficulties and found no significant gender differences. Srivastava and Afiah (1992) investigated differences in boys and girls with learning difficulties. It was found that there is no significant difference in difficulties of language spoken or written, spelling, reading and arithmetic between the two genders.

The result of the present study also demonstrated that boys and girls with learning difficulties both have similar levels of anxiety ( $t= 0.486, P > 0.05$ ), as shown in Table 3 and self-esteem ( $t = 0.629, P > 0.05$ ), as shown in Table 4. Kling, Hyde, Showers, and Buswell (1999) conducted a research to find out the level of self-esteem between males and females with learning difficulties. It was found that because both the groups were equally affected by learning difficulties and there were not many differences in the scores of both the groups.

In the school settings students with learning difficulties have always been present. Alarmingly, learning difficulty is an “invisible condition” which is not understood by teachers and parents. As a result many children with learning difficulties spend their time in frustration and embarrassment. A great majority of these children exhibit a combination of academic and socio-emotional problems. As a result, low self-esteem and high anxiety develops among those affected by any or all learning difficulties.

### **Conclusion**

The study provides evidence suggesting that children suffering from learning difficulties have higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem as compared to children without learning difficulties. Unfortunately these children are not identified as having a learning difficulty therefore they are not given appropriate and timely instructions. As a result they develop higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem. The study further discovered that both the genders with learning difficulties are equally affected. It was found that there is no significant difference in the level of anxiety and self-esteem in learning difficulties faced by boys and girls. It is inferred from the findings of the study that children with learning difficulty will develop more severe psychological symptoms if not diagnosed in time. Proper intervention is more likely to be successful if applied early and carried out by expert teachers.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The participants included in the study were children with learning difficulties of the age group 6 to 11 years, studying in different private and public schools in Peshawar. This can be repeated and the researchers can conduct a research on the same topic including different age groups and may also conduct a comparative study on private and public schools.

School teachers should be given training in identifying learning difficulties children so that interventions can be given at appropriate time which will save children from developing further complications.

School psychologists need to be appointed so that they can help children improve their self-esteem and other psychological issues.

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