



Case Study : Mapping long-term mental health in autistic kids



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<https://www.bps.org.uk/research-digest/mapping-long-term-mental-health-autistic-kids>

Article

Previous studies on mental health in autistic children often use mixed-age samples and cross-sectional designs, limiting understanding of how mental health issues develop over time. Dr Nicola Wright felt that this left a gap in knowledge about the longitudinal mental health trajectories of autistic versus allistic (non-autistic) children. Therefore, Wright's study aimed to investigate the types, timings, and developmental trajectories of mental health issues in autistic and allistic children, with an additional focus on gender differences and the role of external factors such as gender and social class.

Data on autistic children were sourced from a Canadian longitudinal study following children from the point of autism diagnosis (ages 2–4). Allistic children's data were drawn from a UK-based cohort on child conduct, comprising 1,233 mothers and their children followed from pregnancy through to age 9.5.

Both studies employed the Child Behaviour Checklist at multiple time points to assess emotional, behavioural, and attention-related problems. Additional data on family income, maternal education, IQ, and autistic symptoms were also collected. Parents in both studies responded to a number of questions related to their child's behaviour and different versions of the checklist existed for different age groups. Checklist responses were converted into syndrome scales, specifically focusing on anxious/depressed symptoms, aggressive behaviour, and attention problems. Analysis included comparisons between autistic and allistic groups, as well as subgroup analysis by gender and IQ, while also considering socioeconomic variables. Children took part in a semi-structured assessment to assess their symptoms of poor mental health.

Autistic children consistently exhibited higher levels of mental health issues compared to their allistic peers, with small differences in overall growth patterns. They showed significantly higher anxious/depressed scores and emergence of attention problems in later childhood. It may be that the more pressure autistic young people are under to meet to neurotypical norms and expectations. However other factors played a role in both groups: lower family income was linked to higher rates of anxiety, aggression, and attention problems, while higher income was associated with increases in anxiety and depression over time. Higher IQ was associated with a lower level of attention issues in autistic children and in both groups less likely to exhibit mental health issues.

Autistic girls were more likely to experience anxiety and depression than autistic boys, while boys were more frequently reported to have aggression and attention issues. As the team highlights, girls often obtain their autism diagnoses later in life than boys. It would make sense, therefore, that those with more severe and obvious symptoms earlier in life are more likely to receive a diagnosis in childhood. Given that the current study's sample involved officially diagnosed children, it's likely that at least some of these sex differences are the result of wider diagnostic quirks. These sex differences were also significantly reduced when accounting for IQ.

Key limitations include the comparison of samples from different countries (Canada and the UK), potentially introducing cultural individual differences. Differences in racial and socioeconomic diversity between samples also limit generalisability because the Canadian sample was more diverse than the UK sample. Additionally, parental awareness of diagnosis may have influenced how behaviours were perceived and reported, potentially inflating group differences. Suggesting that parent's of allistic children may not have reported certain symptoms as they were not looking out for them.

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Links to Specification

5.6 Issues and debates

- Culture (e.g. cultural differences in diagnosis practices) and gender e.g. gender featuring as a difference in frequency of a disorder).

7.1.7 Autism

- The features of autism.

7.1.9 Developmental psychology

- Effects on development of developmental disorders, including autism.

7.6 Issues and debates

- Practical issues in the design and implementation of research
- Culture
- The use of psychological knowledge within society
- Issues relating to socially sensitive research

9.3 Issues and debates

- Practical issues in the design and implementation of research
- Culture
- Issues relating to socially sensitive research

Recommended revision and research activities:

1. Explain one strength and weakness of this piece of research into mental health and Autism. Explain one way to improve this piece of research to address the limitation that you identified.
2. Using reliable sources (e.g. NHS, WHO, academic articles, or government reports), research how family income and education level affect children's mental health outcomes.

Challenge task: Title: *Compare and Contrast Mental Health Trajectories*

Task: Choose one additional research article that explores mental health in either autistic or allistic children (can be from a psychology textbook, academic journal, or reputable website).

Activity: Create a Venn diagram comparing the findings from that study with the findings in the abstract you just read.

Exam style questions*

1. Describe the features of Autism. (4)
2. Explain one practical issue when researching autism. (2)
3. Explain one individual difference that can affect someone with Autism and the development of Autism. (2)

[\(Click here to view Model Response sections\)](#)

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Liam is 15 years old was diagnosed with Autism when he was 5. His parents have noticed overtime, that he struggles to communicate with his teachers, which can become very challenging for Liam and can result in him walking away in anger. In year 7 when Liam started secondary school his friendship group became very small because he struggled to make friends. Since starting his GCSE's Liam's parents noticed that Liam has become increasingly less attentive at home and at school. He has also become anxious, in particular when he sits mock exams, which has resulted in Liam being also diagnosed with anxiety.

1. Discuss how Liam's autism has developed over his childhood. (8)
2. Evaluate issues with culture and gender in research in Psychology. (8)

*Exam style questions are not necessarily the exact format of those that will appear in the qualification examination papers but are written to elicit student responses that meet the assessment criteria, which are exemplified by the answers provided. The length of response in the answers is not indicative of expected student responses, and are provided to support centre teaching, student practice and self-assessment.





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Model Response - [Click here to return to question page](#)

Exam style questions:

1. Describe the features of Autism. (4)

Autism is a developmental disorder and 75% of those with autism are male. Autistic children were more likely to exhibit 'anxious-depressed' problems compared to their allistic peers. People with Autism have difficulty forming relationships with other people due to issues with being able to communicate. Around 10% of people with autism are very good with a specific ability such as playing a musical instrument.

1. Explain one practical issue when researching autism. (2)

One practical issue is that participant variables such as parents knowing their child's diagnosis of autism may affect results. For example, Wright 2023, Parents with knowledge of their child's diagnosis may have picked up on and reported certain behaviours simply because they were aware of their child's autism. This lowers the accuracy of the results regarding the trajectory of mental health with children with autism as parents who may be unaware their child has autism, or their child does not have autism may not notice certain behaviours and therefore may not report it. Therefore, lowering the validity of the findings that children with autism are more likely to experience mental health issues than children without.

3. Explain one individual difference that can affect someone with Autism and the development of Autism. (2)

One individual difference that can affect someone with autism and the development of autism, is gender and the difference in mental health trajectory between genders, who are diagnosed with autism. For example, Wright found that autistic girls were more likely to be anxious or depressed than autistic boys, whereas boys were more likely to be reported to display aggression and attention issues. This suggests that gender can affect the development of disorder.

Marks awarded and commentary

1. This response would achieve full marks because four features are described: 75% are male (1), more likely to exhibit anxious depressed problems (1), difficulty forming relationships (1), and 10% with a special ability (1).
2. This response would achieve full marks: identifying the weakness of participant variables being the parent's knowing their child's diagnosis (1) and justifying how the participant variable would affect the validity by explaining how each parent may report their child's behaviour differently (1).
3. This response would achieve full marks: identifying the individual difference of gender and mental health (1) and justifying with Wright (1)





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Model Responses - ([Click here to return to question page](#))

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Liam is 15 years old was diagnosed with Autism when he was 5. His parents have noticed, overtime he struggles to communicate with his teachers , which can become very challenging for Liam and can result in him walking away in anger. In year 7, when Liam started secondary school, his friendship group became very small because he struggled to make friends. Since starting his GCSE's Liam's parents noticed that Liam has become increasingly less attentive at home and at school. He has also become anxious, when he sits mock exams, which has resulted in Liam being also diagnosed with anxiety.

Discuss how Liam's autism has developed over his childhood. (8)

The following paragraphs could form part of the answer to this question:

(AO1) According to Wright 2023, children with autism have been found to experience anxious depressed problems compared to their peers and are more likely to demonstrate attention problems in later childhood. This maybe due to the increase of the demands on executive functions and social adaptations skills in later childhood. Suggesting that children with autism can develop anxiety and depression more than children who do not have autism as they grow up.

(AO2) This can explain why Liam's parents have stated to notice that Liam has become very anxious at school because the pressure of GCSE's require more demands on his executive functions that are already stretched trying to fit in with neurotypical norms at secondary school. This can include him being anxious going into an exam hall with several other students, which is not part of his normal routine.

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

Evaluate issues with culture and gender in research in Psychology. (20)

AO1: Wright investigated the type and timings of mental health problems in autistic and non-autistic (allistic) children. For this research, data on autistic children were gathered from a longitudinal study of Canadian children. All were recruited to the study at the point of diagnosis, aged between two and four years old. Data on allistic children were taken from a different location — a cohort study on conduct issues in children based in the North-West of England. In this second study, 1,233 mothers had been recruited during pregnancy and subsequently interviewed when their children were 2.5, 3.5, 5, 7, and 9.5 years old.

AO3: An issue with culture in Child Psychology research is that individual differences in samples are not always taken into account. For example, Wright points out that the Canadian sample was more diverse than the UK sample in terms of racial and socioeconomic diversity. Cultural issues therefore affect Wright's research because the samples were not matched for cultural differences, which means that any differences found in mental health with children with autism and those without may have been the result cultural differences in the samples rather than having autism or not. Suggesting that the cultural diversity between the two samples may have affected the results and therefore lowering the validity of the findings on mental health development and autism. Therefore, there are issues with culture in Child Psychology research. Consequently, the development of anxiety and depression in children with autism may not be a universal developmental trait of autism.

Level awarded and commentary

Discuss how Liam's autism has developed over his childhood. (8)

The first paragraph (AO1) demonstrates accurate and thorough knowledge and understanding about one developmental aspect of Autism, taken from the Wright study. The second paragraph (AO2) is applied well and not superficial. For example, applying why Liam maybe experienced more demands on his executive function. Further, similarly structured paragraphs with different developmental aspects as difficulty making friends and problems with communication, this would be a level 4 response overall.

Evaluate issues with culture and gender in research in Psychology. (20)

The first paragraph (AO1) demonstrates accurate and thorough knowledge and understanding of a piece of research in Child Psychology. It explains the aims and the sample. The second (AO3) paragraph considers how individual differences such as culture affect research into child psychology. It identifies the limitation being the cultural differences between the two samples and then justifies with how not controlling for the cultural diversity affects the validity of the results. A judgment is made followed by a wider implication for the research. The paragraph would benefit from a counterargument to be judged at a level 5 response.

