Anxiety in Williams syndrome

by Dr Debbie Riby, Dr Jacqui Rodgers, & Dr Mary Hanley

It is recognised that both children and adults with Williams syndrome (WS) can be more prone to anxiety than people who do not have WS. A number of research studies have revealed high levels of anxiety and incidences of fears and / or phobias in children and adults with the disorder. Indeed some children might show more fears than children with other forms of intellectual difficulty, and more than children who are developing typically. It has also been suggested that there are some types of anxiety symptoms that are particularly common in WS; therefore these might be disorder-specific. For example, our own research has reported a high incidence of separation anxiety disorder, generalised anxiety disorder and the fear of physical injury. We have used interviews with parents as well as standardised parent questionnaires to ask questions about their child’s behaviour and anxieties. For example, when probing separation fears, parents have reported in interviews that their child becomes anxious when faced with being separated from them or worried about their health and well-being. These are just a few types of anxiety that might be more prevalent in WS than in other disorders or in typical development. Conversely, individuals with WS might be no more prone than other children to some forms of anxiety, such as social anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder. However, we must remember that every child will be different in the type of problems they face and the way they cope with their anxieties. Furthermore, anxiety may change with age and so it is important that these issues are monitored and followed-up for individuals with WS. There will be different challenges in an individual’s life at different time points and these challenges or changes of routine (e.g. starting secondary school, challenges of adolescence) might impact upon the presentation of anxiety symptoms. Therefore we should be mindful of the specific needs of an individual in relation to what is happening in life at that time and how this might evolve with age, experience and life challenges.

Research from our group has gone a little further than merely describing which types of anxiety might be more or less prevalent in WS, to also consider anxiety in relation to other behaviours; specifically repetitive behaviours / routines and sensory processing issues (e.g. aversions or fascinations with sound). In other developmental disorders such as Autism there appears to be a relationship between anxiety and the presence of sensory sensitivities and the presence of repetitive behaviours. It appears that for some individuals sensory difficulties (like fear or aversion to sounds) may contribute to the development of anxiety and that engagement in repetitive behaviours may then provide a ‘calming’ response. It is therefore clearly important to explore the relationship between anxiety and other aspects of behaviour in order to understand the impact of anxiety on a child’s everyday life and also the wider impact upon the family. There is no doubt that coping with a child’s anxiety can be a major challenge for the whole family. Therefore, access to appropriate support networks and intervention strategies is critical.
So, why should we focus on anxiety in relation to understanding WS and the impact that the disorder might have on an individual and their family? If we can find out more about the type of anxieties, fears or phobias that are experienced by children or adults with WS then this will be extremely important in a clinical setting; leading to the development of appropriate assessment methods and interventions that are purposefully targeted to the needs of individuals with WS. One of the challenges that remains for researchers and clinicians is to characterise the nature of anxiety associated with WS for both children and adults and to then consider how best to design WS-specific intervention programmes that will minimise the impact of anxiety for the individual and for their family. There remains some way to go in meeting this aim and providing the support that is needed for families affected by anxiety and this issue should be given research and funding priority due to the positive impact that providing appropriate support could have for WS families.

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Selection of references for published research on anxiety and Williams syndrome


Our Research and Research Group

We are a group of academics, clinicians, researchers and students primarily at Newcastle University (UK), studying behaviour and psychopathology associated with Williams syndrome. For more information please see our webpage or follow our work on Facebook (Newcastle WS Research Group) and Twitter (@Newcastle_WS).

http://www.ncl.ac.uk/psychology/research/WilliamsSyndrome/contact

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