**CSSC Award for Excellence in Educational Research**

**Introduction:**

Socially anxious behaviour can commence between the ages of 2-7 years old (Fox et al., 2020) and if left untreated can lead to psychiatric complications, loneliness, isolation, impaired educational achievement and failure to complete education. The Department of Education have reported that children may have experienced increased stress and low mood in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (DE, 2022). The pandemic and the closure of schools may have led to family systems being impacted by financial insecurity, caregiving burden and confinement-related stress (Prime et al., 2020). Therefore, the stresses and social changes associated with COVID-19 may have acted as a catalyst for the onset of childhood social anxiety disorder (SAD) for some children.

**What study did you implement?**

A small-scale study was conducted to gain a greater understanding of childhood SAD by interviewing educational psychologists and teachers who had worked with young children in nursery / early years, foundation stage (EYFS) and key stage one (KS1) who had symptoms of childhood SAD. This study explored the early developmental factors associated with childhood SAD, the impact of SAD on education, the support available for these children and their teachers and the potential impact of COVID-19 on the social development of young children in Northern Ireland (NI).

**What was the impact of this study?**

Analysis revealed four overall developmental themes which included the child’s environment and genetic vulnerability, evolution of cognitive biases, lack of exposure to novel stimuli and lack of appropriate support and intervention. Childhood SAD was found to have an enormous impact on the child’s academic achievement. Additionally, childhood social development was greatly impacted by COVID-19 and the associated social restrictions. All participants agreed that there is currently not enough support available for children with SAD or their teachers. This study provided evidence that childhood SAD is apparent in young children attending EYFS and KS1 in NI. The COVID-19 pandemic, social restrictions and lockdowns have exposed all children to disruption and uncertainty. However, children with an underlying vulnerability to SAD may have been particularly impacted.

**Advice for implementing in schools:**

Educational psychologists and teachers highlighted three main points. These included:

* the need for a change of terminology,
* the need for increased connection between children with SAD and their teacher
* the need for training and support.

Participants suggested using the term social anxiety ‘difficulties’ rather than social anxiety ‘disorder’ and recommended renaming support services to convey positivity and inclusivity.  Both educational psychologists and teachers highlighted the importance of connection for socially anxious children.  Murray (2018) advises that the connection between the child and their teacher should be positive, nurturing, and emotionally supportive. Finally, participants highlighted the need for the development of specialised training opportunities on childhood SAD for teachers and increased support for children with SAD and their teachers.

**Researcher**

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