# Prevalence of loneliness and friendship in children with learning disabilities: Children's, parents' and teachers' perceptions

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## Abstract

This study investigated loneliness feelings and the quality of friendship among 58 students with learning disabilities, and compared their loneliness and friendship quality evaluations with their parents' and teachers' perceptions. Results revealed variances among groups: the students perceived their loneliness as lower than their parents and teachers. Examining the quality of friendship, results indicated that parents counted a larger number of the student's friends, with a higher degree of student acceptance in class while students tended to have fewer friends. Contrary to the parents' perception, teachers reported less loneliness at school, though no differences were found in teachers' perception of student's loneliness at home. The study highlighted the need for parent and teacher involvement in students' social and emotional difficulties, and accentuated the importance of developing awareness and an ability to differentiate between aspects of loneliness and friendship quality among students with disabilities.

Key words: loneliness, friendship, learning disabilities

Within the last decade there have been repeated suggestions that students with learning disabilities may be considered at higher risk in terms of increased emotional disorders, such as developing feelings of loneliness, and peer-related difficulties during the school years (Gregg, 1996). Many recent studies have found that children and adolescents with disabilities were more likely to experience emotional stress and behavioral maladjustment (Bender, Rosenkrans & Crane, 1999; Huntington & Bender, 1993; Morrison & Cosden, 1997), loneliness (Margalit, 1998), depression (Maag & Reid, 1994), low self-esteem (Heath, 1996; Heyman, 1990), poor social skills (Farmer, et al., 1996; Odom, et al., 1992), or a coexistence of learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders (Miguel, Forness & Kavale, 1996; Rock, et al., 1997). Students with learning disabilities encounter difficulties in acquiring social knowledge and in performing social skills, and they are likely to find it difficult to establish appropriate interrelations with their peers (Chappell, 1994; Erdley & Asher, 1999). Studies have shown that experiences in loneliness among those children are manifested by difficulty in establishing close intimate relationships, having few friends (Margalit, 1994), experiencing frustration and dissatisfaction with existing relationships (Williams & Asher, 1990). Students with LD experience more loneliness than their nondisabled peers (Huntington & Bender, 1993; Margalit &

Alyagon, 1994; Sabornie, 1994), and are at greater risk of being rejected or isolated (Gresham & Reschly, 1986; Stone & La Greca, 1990; Vaughn, 1995). Richards and Wiener (1996) pointed out that children with LD had significantly fewer stable "best friends" and were more likely to interact with their friends at home (Hoosen & Wiener, 1996). Nor is it surprising that students with LD have difficulty using their free time in an enjoyable and satisfying manner, reporting significantly more conflict and betrayal, and less conflict resolution with their friends (Hoosen & Wiener, 1996). Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1997) revealed the lack of positive feelings such as intimacy, loyalty, self-esteem and contact with friends among students with learning problems, who often turn to adults outside the home for social support, rather than peer support, unlike nondisabled students. It should be remembered that not all students with LD are characterized by social deficiencies, social rejection or loneliness (Cartledge, 1987), but it was estimated that 34% to 59% of the children with LD are likely to develop social problems (Kistner & Gatlin, 1989; Sabornie, Marshall & Ellis, 1990).

Comparing parental perceptions of children's emotions or relationships with children's own perceptions, is important since parents play a significant role in challenging and supporting children with special needs (Stone, 1997). Being the parent of a child with learning disabilities may evoke diverse reactions within the family's social network, and in parental adjustment, and involves different degrees of commitment in dealing with the child's deficiencies (Alper, Schloss & Schloss, 1995; Frey, Greenberg & Fewell, 1989; Gallimore, Coots, Weisner, Garnier & Guthrie, 1996; Goodyer, 1990; Hassiotis, 1997; Lesar, Trivette & Dunst, 1995; Margalit, 1994). Parents of children with LD have been described as demonstrating conflict avoidance and over-protectiveness in their interactions with their children (Margalit & Heiman, 1986). Parental perceptions have been examined in several studies in which parents are asked to rate their expectations of their adolescents' performance. In a study by Hiebert (1982), the expectations of parents with children with learning disabilities have generally been found to be significantly lower than those of parents with average achieving adolescents. At school age, most of the parents are confronted with new, changing situations as their children grow and mature. Some parents emphasize learning academic skills while others are concerned mostly with their children's social lives, friendship and the appropriate skills necessary for the child to appropriately manage within society (Falike, 1995). In their study on parental perception of their children's quality of friendship (Wiener & Sunohara, 1998), they found that most parents took an active role in fostering and encouraging their children's friendships. Alper, Schloss & Schloss (1995) stated that parents want their children with LD to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, art and music, drama, scouts and other activities.

Teachers' perceptions of emotional difficulties of students with learning disabilities have been infrequently discussed. In the classroom teachers often see the students with LD struggling with their school work, but only few of them are concerned with the child's social or emotional problems. Unger (1992) found that teachers of students with LD rated young students as more lonely than did the students themselves or than did their parents. Another study in this area found that children rated their emotional and social compatibility higher than did their teachers (Lefkowitz & Tessiny, 1985). Shah and Morgan (1996) noted that 80% of the teachers correctly classified the children's emotional levels. Studies which compared self-reports of students with LD with teachers' reports (Meltzer, et al., 1998; Stone, 1997) revealed significant differences.

The purpose of the present study is to examine parental evaluations of friendship and loneliness of students with learning disabilities and to compare these evaluations with teachers' and students' evaluations. In order to obtain comprehensive information in students' natural settings (e.g., classroom, playground, at home), three different information sources were used: students' self-reports of loneliness and friendship, parents' reports based on contacts with the child at home, and teachers' reports based upon the teacher's ability to identify students who are lonely or have difficulties in social interaction in class.

# Method

## *Research participants*

The sample consisted of 58 students identified as learning disabled from six elementary schools in the central part of Israel, who were included in fifteen regular school classrooms, and whose age ranged from 7.3 to 13 years (M = 10.2, SD = 1.35). The students were diagnosed by municipal psychological services. The psychoeducational measurement included the WISC-R (Wechsler, 1974), Bender-Gestalt Test (Koppitz, 1975), Figure Drawings (Koppitz, 1968), and educational evaluation in learning skills. The school counselors reported IQs varying between 80 and 115. Although the students participated with other students in classroom activities such as literature, mathematics, science, art, gymnastics, they received support from a co-teacher or in a small-group instruction from a special education teacher outside the classroom (especially for language or mathematics). The families were from middle to upper middle socioeconomic levels. All parents (15 fathers and 44 mothers) completed the questionnaires. The parents' age ranged from 30 to 56 (M = 40.47, SD = 4.99) with 8 to 20 years of schooling (M = 13.37, SD = 2.21). The 15 mainstream teachers' experience ranged from three to twenty years of teaching (M = 11.8, SD = 8.16); 21.6% had a seminary degree; 65.8% a B.A., and 12.6% a master's degree. All teachers had worked with the students they rated for at least 8 months.

## *Instruments*

### Students' scales
1) Loneliness questionnaire – Child's scale (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). The Hebrew adaptation (Margalit, 1991) consisted of 16 primary items and 8 filler items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5), with higher scores reflecting greater loneliness. The 16 primary school-based items (for example, "It's easy for me to make new friends at school" or "'I feel left out of things at school") comprised the loneliness measure. The 8 filler items (for example, "I like computer games") focused on students' interests and preferred activities and were designed to help students feel more relaxed and to stimulate disclosure of feelings. The internal consistency of the loneliness questionnaire was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91).
2) Friendship Quality questionnaire (Student form). Based on Parker and Asher's questionnaire (1993), the Hebrew adaptation (Margalit, 1991) was used to examine the student's perception of the quality of support, affection and feelings related to friendship. The questionnaire was based on 6 open items: (1) definition of a good friend; (2) places where the student meets with friends; (3) how the student feels when alone; (4) the frequency of feelings of loneliness at school and at home; (5) reactions to loneliness; and (6) advice on how to make friends. In order to determine content validity and to classify the categories, the answers were evaluated by three graduates with a second degree in special education who were familiar with this particular type of research. The evaluators provided feedback on the relevance of the items. Agreement was found in 90% of the categories. The reliability score for the categories for the entire sample was 97%.

### Adults' scales
1) Loneliness questionnaire – Adult's scale (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 1990). The same questionnaire used for students was adapted for parents and teachers, but with the items written in the third person. The aim of this questionnaire was to measure loneliness as perceived by an adult who was familiar with the child. The internal consistency of this scale was high, with Cronbach's alpha being .93 for parents and .95 for teachers.

2) Friendship Quality questionnaire (Adult form) (Heiman, 1995). In order to examine parent and teacher evaluations of students' quality of friendship, the open questionnaire was based on five items measuring (1) the number of friends; (2) social status; (3) loneliness at school, (4) loneliness at home, and (5) after-school activities. All answers were categorized, and evaluated by three graduates with a second degree in special education or social work, who were familiar with the research project. The evaluators agreed on 90% of the categories. The reliability score for the categories for the entire sample was 96%.

## Procedure

To eliminate inaccurate evaluations due to reading difficulties, the students were individually tested in their classrooms during school hours. The interviews were conducted by the author and took approximately 20 to 30 minutes for each student. To omit any counterweights, the scales were presented in the same order to all students: 1) loneliness questionnaires and 2) friendship questionnaires. In order to match the questionnaires with students, parents and teachers, each questionnaire was coded. Classroom teachers participating in this study completed the questionnaires during the school workshops. The parents were interviewed in the afternoon at home.

# Results

## Loneliness

In order to differentiate between the various ages of the students, they were divided into two groups: the younger group (grade 2 through 4; aged 7.5 to 10) included 23 children, the older group included 35 adolescents (grade 5 and 6; aged 10.5 to 13). In order to examine differences among the three evaluators (self-reports, parents, teachers), a repeated measures MANOVA (evaluators x age x gender) was performed with loneliness as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for evaluators, $F (2, 48) = 6.05$; $p < .01$, age $F (1, 42) = 4.97$; $p < .05$, and a significant interaction between evaluators and gender, $F (2, 48) = 4.30$; $p < .05$. Significant differences in perceptions of loneliness between the three evaluators were obtained. Table 1 presents the mean scores on the Loneliness Questionnaires as distributed by age and gender. The teachers perceived the student's loneliness to be greater than the parents or the students.

**Table 1**
Distribution of scores on the Loneliness Questionnaire by age and gender

| Variables | | Young (n = 23) | | Adolescents (n = 35) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Boys | Girls | Boys | Girls |
| Students' loneliness | M | 40.57 | 53.80 | 35.80 | 37.35 |
| | SD | (15.44) | (13.17) | (10.87) | (12.89) |
| Parent's evaluation of the child loneliness | M | 43.93 | 45.80 | 34.20 | 36.59 |
| | SD | (16.56) | (10.30) | (12.87) | (17.76) |
| Teacher's evaluation of the child loneliness | M | 51.21 | 50.80 | 46.10 | 36.76 |
| | SD | (17.57) | (5.67) | (10.93) | (17.86) |

A univariate ANOVA comparing younger and older age groups revealed that teachers reported significantly more loneliness in younger than older students, whereas no such differences were found for parents or students (Table 2).

**Table 2**
Age comparisons on loneliness scores

| Variables | Mean | SD | df | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Students' loneliness | | | | |
| Younger students | 41.86 | 16.24 | 1 | 2.41 |
| Adolescents | 36.20 | 11.32 | | |
| Parents' perceptions | | | | |
| Younger students | 43.45 | 16.68 | 1 | 3.05 |
| Adolescents | 35.76 | 15.73 | | |
| Teachers' perceptions | | | | |
| Younger students | 49.19 | 15.19 | 1 | 7.86** |
| Adolescents | 38.21 | 15.40 | | |

Note. ** $p < 0.01$

Finally, as shown in Figure 1, a significant interaction between gender and evaluator was found. Teachers reported more loneliness in boys than girls, whereas girls' self-reports were higher than teachers' or parents' reports.
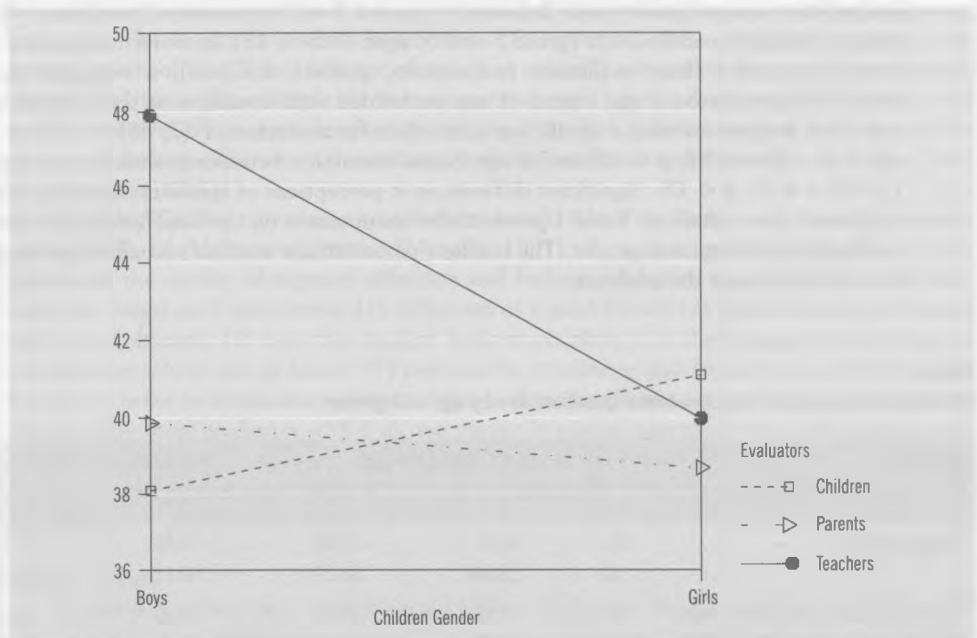


**Figure 1**
Perception of loneliness by evaluators and gender

# Friendship

Questions were asked to determine the students' best friend. Results showed that 31% (n = 18) of the students with LD perceived their best friend as someone who helps them, 24.1% (n = 14) as someone with whom they get fun, 19% (n = 11) of the students perceived their best friend as emotionally supportive, and 13.8% (n = 8) as someone with whom they can share experience and thoughts. When asked about the different places students meet with friends, the students reported that they met their friends at school (34.5%, n = 20), at home (22.4%, n = 13) or elsewhere in the neighborhood (14.1%, n = 7). Thirty-one percent of the students (n = 18) did not answer this question. In times of loneliness, the students felt sad (34.5%, n = 20), angry (5.2%, n = 8), bored (1.7%, n = 1), or indifferent (e.g., "I don't talk, I do not have anyone to talk to, I sit and watch them") (50%, n = 29).

Most students felt lonely at home (37.9%, n = 22), whereas 32.7% (n = 19) experienced loneliness at school time, and 25.8% (n = 15) felt lonely during playing with peers. In times of loneliness, students tended to play at the computer or watch television (63.8%, n = 37). Few of them initiated play with peers (8.6%, n = 5), asked for help from an adult (5.2%, n = 3), or remained passive (22.4%, n = 13). When asked for advice on how to make friends, students with LD suggested proper behavior (31%, n = 18), initiated talking to peers (31%, n = 18), or complied to peers' demands (15.5%, n = 9). Others (12.1%, n = 7) suggested to give candies or cards to peers in order to make friends.

Most parents and teachers (70.6%, n = 41; 67.2%, n = 39, respectively) reported that the child participated in different after-school activities. Watching television (50% of the parents, 11.5% of the teachers; $\chi^2 (1, n = 71) = 8.84, p < 0.01$) and playing at the computer (35.2%, 17.3%; $\chi^2 (1, n = 70) = 16.63, p < 0.01$) were significantly more reported by parents than teachers, whereas no significant differences between parents and teachers were found for playing with other peers (57%, 20%), reading (12.1%, 5.8%), listening to music (5.6%, 5.2%), and sports (27.8%, 23.1%).

A comparison between parents' and teachers' perceptions of friendship qualities (Table 3) showed that parents reported significantly more friends and a significantly higher social status in class than did the teacher. On the contrary, teachers reported significantly more loneliness at school. No significant differences were found between parents' and teachers' perceptions of loneliness at home.

**Table 3**
Differences in friendship perceptions between parent and teachers

| Variables | Mean | SD | $\chi^2$ | df | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of friends | | | 174.67 | 72 | < 0.00 |
| Parents | 4.04 | 3.36 | | | |
| Teachers | 3.51 | 3.62 | | | |
| Social status[a] | | | 35.51 | 9 | < 0.00 |
| Parents | 2.88 | 0.96 | | | |
| Teachers | 2.56 | 1.05 | | | |
| Lonely at school[b] | | | 25.99 | 9 | < 0.01 |
| Parents | 1.58 | 0.78 | | | |
| Teachers | 1.88 | 0.90 | | | |
| Lonely at home[c] | | | 2.94 | 6 | n.s |
| Parents | 1.25 | 0.51 | | | |
| Teachers | 1.58 | 0.87 | | | |

Note. [a] range (1) low status – (4) high status; [b, c] range (1) lonely – (4) not lonely.

## Predicting loneliness

To examine the contributions of both adult and student evaluations in the prediction of loneliness, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, in which the independent variables were entered simultaneously. The dependent variable was loneliness, the independent variables were parent and teacher evaluations of loneliness, parent and teacher reports of after-school activities (watching television or playing at the computer), gender and age. As can be seen in Table 4, parent loneliness significantly predicted student loneliness ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$), as did teacher loneliness ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$), parent reports of after-school activities (watching television, computer games) ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), and gender ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$). The adjusted multiple R was .51. Age did not significantly add to the prediction of student loneliness.

**Table 4**
Regression analysis predicting student loneliness

| Predictor variable | B | β | t |
|---|---|---|---|
| Parent loneliness perception | 0.29 | 0.33 | 3.00** |
| Teacher loneliness perception | 0.31 | 0.36 | 3.06** |
| Parent perceptions of student's after-school activity[1] | 5.71 | 0.22 | 2.74** |
| Gender | 9.41 | 0.32 | 3.96** |
| Age | -0.25 | -0.06 | -0.71 |

F $(5,83) = 18.32$; $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.54$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.51$.
** $p < 0.01$.
Note. [1] Playing with the computer and watching television.

# Discussion

This study examined correspondences and discrepancies in perceptions of loneliness and friendship among students with LD, their parents and their teachers. A comparison of the groups consistently showed that parents and teachers perceive students to be lonelier than students themselves reported, with the teachers ascribing the greatest degree of loneliness. Further, younger children with LD expressed more intense feelings of loneliness than did older children. These results strengthened the suspicion that the social and emotional problems of students with LD were an inseparable part of their learning disabilities (Geisthardt & Munsch, 1996). In addition, as reported in other studies (Margalit, 1991, 1994), students with learning disabilities tended to engage in solitary activities, such as watching television, playing computer games or reacting passively (e.g., not initiating friendships, remaining in his or her room).

Most parents expressed concerns about their child's social problems, as well as concerns about their child's future adjustment and lack of social skills. The concept of loneliness is considered by most parents to be negative and problematic. The teachers' evaluations provided additional validation of the students' self-reported loneliness. Teachers play an important role in the enhancement of students' academic achievements. They can be leaders of social and emotional intervention in the classroom, they are able to predict future disturbances in students and to notice certain behavioral and emotional problems, including antisocial behavior and relationships with others.

The teachers had significantly more negative perceptions of the students' emotional feelings than the students themselves. These findings were consistent with those reported by Adelman et al. (1979), McLoughlin et al. (1987) and Stone (1997). The discrepancies between parents and teachers can be explained by the two different perspectives of loneliness: at school, the teachers compared the students with their nondisabled peers, whereas at home, the parents included in their ratings other siblings, family climate or personal characteristics. Another possible explanation for these discrepancies may be that teachers had a more limited experience with the students or were biased to consider them as having more problems in every way.

The present study highlighted the need for parent and teacher involvement in the treatment of students with LD displaying social and emotional difficulties. Furthermore, it accentuated the importance of developing an awareness and an ability to differentiate between aspects of loneliness and friendship quality among these students. Since too many students with LD face problems in forming friendships, this may be an opportunity to stimulate parental and teacher sensitivity to friendship relationships and social problems. Furthermore, treatment should focus on the variety of supportive strategies as well as on the empowerment of parental abilities needed to help the child better plan, organize, implement and monitor his social and emotional live.

Although this study provided useful information on loneliness and friendship among students with LD, the findings are limited and more research is needed on 1) the meaning of loneliness and the perception of friendship among students with LD, 2) evaluations of different educational situations by peers, and 3) the impact of social interventions on the students. Due to the small sample size and the limited number of measures included, additional research is required within larger samples, including students with different types of learning disabilities.

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